ESTCOURT

VOL. I.

ESTCOURT

A Novel

BY

LORD JAMES DOUGLAS

IN TWO VOLUMES
VOL. I.

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DEDICATED

TO

The Duke of Hamilton and Brandon, K.T.,

WHOSE COLOURS UPON THE FLAT AND OVER A

COUNTRY HAVE ALWAYS BEEN

CARRIED TO THE ADMIRATION OF

THE AUTHOR—

JAMES DOUGLAS.

ESTCOURT.

CHAPTER I.

It was a bright, sunny, hot afternoon towards the end of July. The whole earth seemed to revel in the glorious rays of the sun, which from a blue, cloudless sky cast its golden beams upon the surrounding country. Nothing is more calculated to impress a stranger with the true greatness of England than a really fine day in one of her fairest counties. London may convince a foreigner of the wealth of the British trader; but the fogs, dirt, and generally cheerless aspect of our great city are also apt to impress him with a feeling of disgust and discomfort.

Upon the endless expanse of golden corn-fields, green pastures, and dark woods which surround the domain of Estcourt, the sun cast floods of golden fire. The huge grey castle, with its massive walls, ivy-covered turrets, and sloping terraces, stood out in bold relief from the surrounding woods of silver firs, copper beeches, and giant oaks. The thickly-timbered park stretched away far as the eye could reach, until its green undulating surface was lost to view in the dark recesses of the woods which formed its boundary. From the tall square keep of Estcourt the park, gardens, and home coverts seemed to nestle side by side, while far away stretched thousands of acres of rich corn-lands, meadows, and hay-fields, all of which were part of the Estcourt estate. The castle itself was the show-place of the northern counties. The acres of gardens, hot-houses, endless terraces, and forest glades were at once the pride of the county and the wonder and admiration of holiday-makers, permitted by the kindness

of the owner to wander through the grounds and park. Many a lovely painting, destined to be hung in the Royal Academy, had been inspired by the forest glades at Estcourt, which had made more than one artist almost frantic with delight.

In ancient days, when a life on the borders was one of danger and responsibility, Estcourt had belonged to the great Earls of Northumberland, and had been so fortified and strengthened by them as to be well-nigh impregnable.

Many a battering, in many a siege, had the old walls withstood; and many a sortie had been made from the huge court-yard to repel the plundering raids which the Scottish moss-troopers carried right up to the castle walls.

Time, however, had changed the destinies of Estcourt. The old walls and huge tower still remained, a monument of a bygone age. But new wings had been from time to time added to suit more modern ideas, until in

this present century the old castle had become a luxurious modern residence, vast in size, and imposing in appearance, but with little semblance of its former self.

The ancient banner of the house of Percy no longer waved from the old square keep; Estcourt had virtually ceased to be theirs. Like many other princely properties, it had gone through the female line. And since the fourteenth century the Earls of Linden, of the house of Balvenie, had reigned at Estcourt Castle.

William, tenth earl of Linden, and fourteenth baron of Balvenie, father of the present proprietor of Estcourt, had been one of the best-known men of his day. Generous to a fault, yet still carrying out the old adage of his family, "Never forget a friend, and never forgive a foe." A ruthless maxim, whose first clause had cost him several hundred thousands, and whose second had given him countless enemies.

Marrying somewhat late in life a daughter

of an ancient though penniless border family, William Lord Linden left two sons—William David, his heir, and Percy George.

His eldest born, as years passed on, proved a source of disappointment to his father. Proud to a fault, and in his pride considering himself equal to any family in Europe, it first of all displeased the Earl that his son resolutely declined to marry. In his eyes it was a sin that the heir to his ancient earldom should prefer the society of actresses, and the dissipations of Paris and other capitals, to settling down and enjoying what he himself in early youth had not appreciated—the pleasures of life at Estcourt.

Finding it impossible to control the mode of life of his heir, Lord Linden had striven hard to pave the way to a brilliant marriage for his younger son. In this also he had been disappointed. "Like father, like son," is an old maxim, and Percy Eskdale had by marrying, like his father, a portionless though beautiful and noble daughter of the house of Scott,

strained the temper of the old earl to its limits.

On hearing of the marriage, the Earl vowed with a furious imprecation that as his youngest son had made his bed so might he lie; and all who knew him were sure that from his word he would never move.

Time flew on; overture after overture for reconciliation the younger son made, but without avail. The Earl remained implacable. A certain allowance he made to Percy every year; small, but sufficient to keep him from want. And not even on the birth of two sons and a girl was Lord Linden tempted to increase it.

From his wild resentments and somewhat selfish life the Earl was, however, summarily called away, a fit of apoplexy killing him in four hours, and leaving his heir unfettered in the degraded habits he had adopted.

In the following year Percy, the younger son, was drowned while yachting off the coast of Norway. To do this reckless young scion

of the Eskdale house justice, he had made some provision for his wife and children by an insurance upon his life, thus enabling them at any rate to live without recourse to the charity or generosity of his brother.

Lord Linden, whom the world had come to look upon as a confirmed bachelor, created a slight sensation in society, two years after his father's death, by taking unto himself a wife—a widow handsomely dowered with two daughters and a son, but otherwise neither rich nor beautiful, and with a temper which the Earl soon found (to his cost) the reverse of heavenly.

To say that Mrs. Eskdale did not feel the marriage of her brother-in-law would be certainly untrue. She had always looked upon her eldest son Ronald as heir to the Linden estates, and this unexpected marriage, perhaps not unnaturally, grieved and disappointed her. However, as years passed away, and no children appeared, she, as well as the rest of the world, began again to feel confident that by

young Ronald Eskdale the somewhat tarnished honours of the house of Linden would be once more worthily assumed.

And so far as we may judge from the old adage, that "the boy is father of the man," young Ronald certainly bade fair to be what his father had been before him—headstrong and rash perhaps, but nevertheless a gentleman in every sense of the word.

Our story opens on the lovely July afternoon depicted at the commencement of this chapter.

Estcourt, clad in bright summer hues, was certainly looking its best; and a fairer scene than the one visible from the open library windows, looking on the heavily-timbered park below, it would have been impossible to find in any of England's many beautiful counties.

But lovely though the evening, and bright the scene which lay unfolded beneath his gaze, neither seemed much to affect the dark, stern-looking man, who, with an open letter

in his hand, and a somewhat sarcastic smile on his face,—still handsome, though time and a reckless life had left their unmistakable marks,—let his eyes wander over the fairy view beneath him as if totally unconscious of its beauty.

With the letter still in his hand, and with a half-sigh, the owner of Estcourt, after several minutes of apparent thought, moved impatiently from the open window to the fire-place, and having lit a cigarette, threw himself with a muttered oath into an arm-chair.

"There is no help for it," he mused, as he blew the rings of smoke from his mouth, and watched them eddying and rising above his head; "none. Of course the children must come here; besides, this young Ronald is my heir after all, and my brother's son. My lady wife may cut up as rough as she likes, the revenues of Estcourt and Balvenie were certainly never intended to enrich the offspring of General Burton. I suppose I had better break the news to her at once, and also

make her understand that it will be as well for her to impress upon that unbearable boy of hers that Ronald and his sister and brother come here as my brother's children. It will be a trying interview," he continued grimly, "and one I had better get over as soon as possible."

So, determined to act while the inclination was upon him, Lord Linden rose from his chair and moved slowly towards the door.

"Where is your mother, Mabel?" he inquired, as, crossing the great entrance-hall, he saw his youngest and favourite stepdaughter, a pretty child of some ten years old, playing with a massive, solemn-looking bloodhound. "She has not gone out driving, has she?"

"No; mother is in her boudoir, I think," answered the child as she rose from the floor, but still played with the long flapping ears of her favourite. "She is very busy with Coralie about a dress for the fancy ball next

week. Maude is with her, but she sent me away, so I came to play with Hector."

"Ah, well, the dress must wait for some other time," muttered the Earl, as he mounted the wide oaken staircase two steps at a time. "My lady and Maude spend their whole time in studying dress and appearance. I might as well have married a *modiste*."

With a preliminary tap upon the door of his wife's boudoir, but without waiting for an answer, the Earl entered the room—a satin-hung little apartment, gaily furnished, and luxuriously fitted up, but too showy to please the eye of an artist.

Lying indolently upon a low wide sofa, which was piled and padded with soft cashmere and covered with old lace, reclined Lady Linden. Traces of beauty were still apparent in her somewhat classic features, much marred, however, by the too evident use of rouge and paint, which not even the rose blinds served to soften. The floor and adjoining table were strewn and heaped with silks and

satins, yards of fine old lace, and glittering jewellery.

On the entrance of her husband Lady Linden gave a vague stare of astonishment. The Earl seldom honoured her apartments with his presence, and never without first sending to ascertain whether she was at leisure.

"What can bring you here at this hour, Linden?" was her somewhat impatient greeting. "I should have thought you were at the paddocks studying your yearlings. I am really very busy choosing materials for this fancy dress ball, so if your business is not very important, perhaps you would not mind postponing it."

"It is important," replied the Earl; "and as to this ball, you will not be able to attend it. My sister-in-law, my brother's wife, is dangerously ill, and cannot possibly live more than a few days, so the ball is out of the question. Would you kindly send your maid and Maude away, Margaret?" he continued,

impatiently. "I have private affairs to settle with you."

"Oh, of course if you have really anything important to tell me," drily responded his wife, "I am at your service. But what an inconvenient time your sister-in-law has chosen to die!" she added lightly. "Of course, as I have never seen her, I cannot be expected to be overwhelmed with grief; and this ball was to have been the best ever given in London."

"I shall leave by the night mail to-night," went on Lord Linden coldly, as, without appearing to notice his wife's unfeeling remarks, he walked to the bow-window and contemplated the view. "I have telegraphed to have it stopped for me. I——"

"You do not mean to say you intend going to Scotland to-night?" asked Lady Linden, in a tone of amazement. "What for? Why, you have never seen Mrs. Eskdale since she married your brother!"

"That was no fault of mine," quietly replied the Earl, as a shadow crossed his face. "When

my brother died his wife never sought my confidence, never asked my help. She may have had her reasons; it is not for me to judge. But now upon her death-bed she has written to me, and I shall naturally obey her wishes. The children will return with me here; and what I wish to impress upon you is——"

"Madelon Scott's children come here!" almost screamed Lady Linden, starting furiously to her feet. "Never, while I can prevent it! Never, Lord Linden, so long as I live beneath your roof!"

"They will, as I have said, return with me," her husband quietly and firmly continued. "Ronald Eskdale is my heir, failing him, his brother William, and if both should die, their sister Violet is heiress to the barony of Balvenie. They will come home with me; and what I wish to impress upon you, Margaret, is that Ronald must be treated as my brother's son, and my heir. This I know you will attend to. But your son Henry has

some curious notions of his own importance. These I must beg you to insist on his dropping. His bills at Eton and Cambridge I have discharged cheerfully, though they were larger than any which I ever contracted when at college. This, as you know, I was not obliged to do, yet I did it to please you. And to oblige me you will, I am sure, point out to Henry that when he honours Estcourt with his presence he must not again assume airs of proprietorship. Ronald Eskdale, not Henry Burton, is heir to this property. And now, Margaret, I have finished; please think quietly over what I have said, and come to a wise conclusion."

"You may say what you please, and act as you think fit, Lord Linden," haughtily answered his wife; "but Estcourt shall not be the joint home of your brother's children and myself. It is for you to choose between us."

"I have already conveyed my decision to you, Margaret," good-humouredly returned the

Earl. "If you do not choose to remain here, my house in Park Lane is at your service. But if you leave Estcourt and create a scandal, remember that in future your son's debts must be your care. I do not know how General Burton provided for his son, but I should think hardly well enough to warrant his extravagant expenditure. Remember what I have said, Margaret; and as you know I never break my word, think it well over, and when I return, let me hear no more of this nonsense." And without giving his wife time to reply, Lord Linden abruptly left the room.

CHAPTER II.

On the Carrick coast, in the south-west of Scotland, lies the little town of Maybole, an insignificant place in itself, but not without beauty. Upon this western shore the wild billows from the North Channel, augmented by the heavy swell from the southern Hebrides, break and roar with undiminished fury. The bay and old castle of Culzean, and the picturesque little hamlet of Douglaston, are all noted in their way; and from this western shore the island of Arran and the lofty Ailsa Craig, with its spray-covered, jagged, and precipitous cliffs, may be seen to the best advantage.

It was not far from the little village of

Douglaston that Percy Eskdale, perhaps attracted by the name to which, upon his mother's side, he had a claim, or perhaps by its facilities for the pursuit he loved best—yachting—had taken up his abode when he first married.

In the pretty rose-covered house, surrounded by a belt of trees which helped, when the gales were high, to keep off the western winds, had Ronald Eskdale, his brother, and sister, first seen the light.

Upon this western coast, the scene of many a gallant exploit by their ancestors in the days when Robert Bruce was struggling for the crown of Scotland, and only acknowledged as the Earl of Carrick, had the two boys spent the happiest days of their life, dreaming not and caring not what great future might lie before them. No fishermen on the coast knew better than they the numerous dangers and sudden storms which were wont to break suddenly from the western isles. No fishermen of the coast knew better how to handle

their craft amidst the intricacies of shoals and rocks than the two brothers. The sea was their second home; they loved it. The wild roar of a storm was as music in their ears, and managing their smart little cutter among the numerous shoals and reefs off the Isle of Arran was to them the height of pleasure.

Up to a certain age Mrs. Eskdale had engaged a tutor to educate her boys at home, after which they had gone to the Edinburgh Academy, in which school more real knowledge is acquired in one year than during several terms at Eton. Mrs. Eskdale had always educated Violet at home; for music she had the best master to be obtained, but in all other branches Mrs. Eskdale had been her sole instructress, and as one of the most talented of the undoubtedly talented house of Scott, she was equal to her self-imposed task.

Though living in a small cottage on a wild western coast, Mrs. Eskdale had never for one moment forgotten what must be the position

of her only daughter in future years, and by every means in her power had educated her so as to fill it well.

* * * * *

In a small darkened room of the pretty cottage—a home which to her had been perhaps happier and more full of mixed griefs and joys than many a statelier edifice of her race—Mrs. Eskdale now lay dying. Few and short were the days which remained to her upon this earth. But in these last hours her thoughts and energies were still, as they had ever been, clear and womanly, and dwelt only upon those, her children, whom she must now leave alone in the world. Alone; for what trust could she place in her wild and, as she believed, selfish brother-in-law?

But in this Mrs. Eskdale judged, as indeed many of us do, by her feelings, not by facts. Lord Linden, selfish, worldly, and unfeeling as the world called him, was far from being so. Proud he was, and as his younger brother, to the day of his death, had held him in con-

tempt, and had never deigned to request his assistance, naturally he had not forced it upon him.

Since that time no communication had been held between the heads of the house of Estcourt and the younger branch, and Lord Linden was too proud and sensitive to make an offer of reconciliation which might have been repulsed.

When our hour of release is at hand, however, we generally see things in a different light. In this Mrs. Eskdale had followed only the laws of nature. Looking back into the long past, it had dawned upon her that perhaps in maintaining this estrangement she had been in error, and at any rate it was a duty to her children to do what she yet could to heal the family division.

Her letter, as we have already shown, was replied to by an intimation that Lord Linden was coming himself.

The Earl was too generous to hint, what he nevertheless thought, that in putting off any

communication with him to the last moment Mrs. Eskdale had shown a somewhat selfish desire to keep her children, and his heir, exclusively to herself. His telegram had been as follows:

"Why did you not send for me sooner? Your children are mine. I am coming at once."

The above answer served somewhat to rouse and cheer her. The fate of her children after her death had always been a matter of anxiety and trouble to her, but this her brother-in-law's telegram had now set at rest.

"Ronald and Willie have not come in yet, have they, Violet?" somewhat eagerly asked Mrs. Eskdale, as about an hour after the receipt of the telegram her daughter entered the sick-room.

"No, mother," quietly replied the girl, as she sat down by the side of the bed and endeavoured to control her sorrow. "You know, mother darling, that you wished them to go out. They went for a cruise up the bay in the Firefly, but they cannot be away much

longer. Do you feel any better this evening?" she continued, bending caressingly over the bed. "You will get well again, will you not, mother? You must! What shall we do without you?"

"My poor little Violet!" gravely answered her mother, as with a feeble effort she stroked the bright sunny head which nestled close to her pillow. "My dear child, it is no use for us to deceive ourselves. But," she continued earnestly, "to you I leave a great charge, and in fulfilling it you will be carrying out that which you know I wish most on earth. Ronald is strong, gifted, and sure to get on. You, my little Violet, every one will love. My only fear is," she resumed with a faint smile, "that every one will spoil you. But Willie is headstrong, passionate, and I am afraid will taste the bitterness of this world before he should. Promise me always to look after and help your youngest brother. He is easily led by those he loves, but no one will ever drive him by force, and I fear your

uncle will not bear with his follies as I have done. Violet, you will try and help Willie as you grow older, and if you possibly can do so, keep him straight."

"Yes, mother, I will," replied the child, as she bravely tried to keep back her sobs. "Mother, dearest, I promise you that I will do all I can to take care of Willie, and if I am able, I will take his faults and punishments upon myself."

Childish vows and childish promises are not as a rule observed in after life. But in this case Violet meant what she said, and, child though she was, well did she keep her promise.

"That must be the boys," murmured Mrs. Eskdale, as after a short interval the door of the little hall was opened and feet were heard pattering upon the staircase. "Let Ronald and Willie come in; I should like to have them with me. No, they will not tire me, my child," as her daughter seemed to hesitate. "I must see my dear little Willie."

"Oh, mother, we have had such a jolly sail!" joyfully exclaimed the younger of the two boys as they entered the room. "The breeze was so fresh, and the Firefly goes twice as well with her new jib, you would hardly—" but here, as the boy's eyes fell on the wasted face before him, and marked the change which even to him was perceptible in it after a few short hours, he broke suddenly off. "Mother, how pale you look!" he went on in an altered tone. "Don't you feel any better?"

"I am not worse, my darling," fondly answered Mrs. Eskdale, as she caught his wondering gaze. "But I think it is time you had your tea; you shall come and say good night to me afterwards. Ronald, your uncle will be here by the early train to-morrow; you had better meet him."

"Our uncle!" exclaimed the bewildered Willie, as, obedient to his elder brother's call, he followed him from the room. "What is our uncle coming here for, Ronald?"

"To see mother, I suppose," gravely and

sadly responded his brother. "Now look here, Willie," he went on sternly, "you are not to make a noise; mother is very unwell, and you really ought to know better than to disturb her. Instead of sixteen, you might be a baby of five, from your thoughtlessness. And remember, you are not to go rushing up-stairs into mother's room unless she sends for you. She might be asleep."

"I won't disturb her. I did not know she was so unwell," murmured the boy, as the tears rose to his dark eyes; "and I will sit here till she sends for me. No, I don't want anything to eat; I want to think of mother."

"But you must have your tea, Willie darling," interrupted a soft young voice behind him. "Come and have tea with me. Mother would be grieved if she thought you would not eat."

"Oh, Violet, is mother very unwell?" passionately exclaimed her brother, as, arriving in the little dining-room, he buried his face in his hands and laid his head upon the

table. "What a brute I am! But I did not know, or I would have been so quiet."

"Of course mother is far from well, Willie," gently replied his sister, as with a great effort she kept back her own tears. "But don't cry; if she sees by your face you have been doing so it will only distress her. Come, drink your tea, and then afterwards you shall say good night to mother."

Although her own heart was heavy with grief, and her mind oppressed with care and dread, still Violet tried hard to cheer and console Willie. The task was by no means an easy one, and it was not until he had been allowed to say good night to his mother, and had gone to bed, that the girl had any opportunity of dwelling on her own grief.

Wrapped in her little dressing-gown, and sitting alone in the sick chamber during the whole night, Violet had ample scope for her reflections, broken only by intervals in which she attended to her mother's wants.

Child though she was, yet the promise she

had given to her mother seemed to her a sacred pledge. And during the weary, lonely hours of that solemn night-vigil, Violet determined to devote her life, as she fancied she had promised, to her youngest brother.

Early in the following morning Lord Linden arrived at Maybole, barely in time to see the last in this world of his brother's wife. The somewhat callous heart of the Earl was keenly touched by what to him appeared the loneliness and poverty of his sister-in-law's home.

Too late it dawned upon him that in not making himself aware of her means and condition he had been in error; while the touching fondness of mother and children for each other, and the bitter agony of their parting, awakened feelings and emotions to which he had been a stranger for many a-day.

At no time does a man, let his rank and influence be what they may, feel so powerless as when brought face to face with a grief that is beyond his aid.

Money and power are, and in this world

always will be, gods of men; but of what avail are they at the time of death? Death is always an unwelcome visitor; it makes us for the time feel and acknowledge our nothingness; even when death is called "a happy release," it is a solemn event, and suggestive of painful thoughts. . . . . And as this novel is intended for pleasant reading, so far as the story of a chequered life can be pleasant, we turn gladly from the episode of Mrs. Eskdale's death to brighter and happier scenes.

A great friend of ours once suggested that our life was passed in selfishness, and that we never took the trouble to inquire into the miseries of other human lives. Our answer may have been also selfish, but it was sincere.

If visiting scenes of want and wretchedness could in any smallest degree lessen the sum of man's woe, none would more gladly do so. But as this could not be the case, we did not think it necessary merely to look at suffering we could not relieve. Once, and only once,

have we visited the poor ward of a great London hospital. The scene was sickening and horrible. It flashed across our mind as we watched the tortures of an unfortunate fellow-creature slowly dragging out his agonized life, of what fallacies the world is made of! A victorious general killed in the hour of victory has a grave in Westminster Abbey, honoured by his sovereign and people. He has died a painless death, or, if not, has had every alleviation wealth and science could afford him. Compare his death and his previous honoured life with that of some unfortunate though honest man, driven by stress of poverty to his last refuge, the workhouse, and dying of a painful, protracted disease. Then ask which of the two is really the hero, and honesty must compel but one answer.

CHAPTER III.

CHILDISH sorrows and childish joys are generally of short duration. The anguish of young Willie Eskdale on the death of his mother had been great in the extreme, but "the greater the grief the sooner mended," is an old and often true adage, to which Willie formed no exception.

The marvellous beauty and grandeur of Estcourt were to him a source of wonder and amazement. In his wildest dreams of fairy-land he had never pictured anything to equal it. Ronald was cold, and apparently took things as a matter of course; Violet was sensitive, and seemed to be afraid of her new position; but Willie was in his element.

The huge castle, the troops of servants, the acres of glass-houses and beautiful woods, were his delight. His bright, merry ways, and, boy though he was, his *savoir-faire*, made him an universal favourite, and won even Lady Linden, who having some of her son's heavy bills shortly to present to her husband, had thought better of her hasty threat to leave the castle, and had resolved to let matters take their course.

Lord Linden was always pleased to have Willie with him; his bright vivacity and eager interest in everything amused and distracted him; but none knew better than the earl that Ronald Eskdale possessed far more feeling and far more brains than his giddy young brother.

Violet was the only one decidedly out of favour with Lady Linden. The child's remarkable beauty annoyed her. Maude was plain, and, indeed, so far as temper or accomplishments went, had not much to recommend her. Violet was accomplished

as well as very pretty, and hence Lady Linden's jealous anger. About Mabel her mother never much troubled herself; the child was always tearing her dresses or otherwise misbehaving, but as her governess and Willie took her greatly off Lady Linden's hands, she was grateful to both. Willie found Mabel an active partner in all his mischievous projects; the two were never out of scrapes, but as these did not in the smallest degree concern or annoy her ladyship, they generally passed unheeded. Being too old for Eton, it was decided by the Earl to send Willie to Harrow, while Ronald at his own request was to have a private tutor, and ultimately to travel.

To this the Earl had at once agreed, being wise and experienced enough to know that travelling and seeing the world and men was better than an idle, objectless life at one of the universities.

Violet, and Violet only, felt dismayed and unhappy at the departure of her elder brother.

Sensitive to a fault, the child had never opened her mind except to Ronald. To him she felt and knew she could talk freely of old and, to her, happy days—days of poverty and straitened circumstances perhaps, but still days which her whole soul and mind yearned to recall. Violet had never forgotten her mother; to her she was still the idol she had ever been. The sacred charge over Willie which she believed had been left to her seemed slipping away from her. Everybody loved and admired him—how could her small influence avail?

Late one night, after the whole household had retired, Violet confided her doubts and misgivings to Ronald when he came, as he always did, to wish her good night.

"Willie is right enough at present, Violet dearest," affectionately replied her brother, as he drew her to him. "But in time Willie may, and, so far as I can see, will, require you, though at present all seems so bright to him. Patience, dear, the time will

come when Willie will be glad to come back to us both, and then you and I will do our best for him, will we not?"

"Do you like Lady Linden's son, Ronald—I mean Henry Burton?" asked Violet, as after a few minutes' silence she looked up into her brother's face. "I don't."

"Nor do I," drily replied her brother, "and he knows it too; but Willie seems to have taken a great fancy to him, and they are never away from the paddocks. It strikes me Henry knows next to nothing about yearlings or race-horses, but to hear him talk one might imagine the whole Estcourt stud belonged to him."

"Will uncle's horse win the 'Cambridgeshire,' Ronald?" went on Violet in a somewhat anxious voice, as she stirred up the fire into a bright blaze. "What is his name? I forget."

"Oh, Marshal Saxe," replied her brother in a laughing tone. "Why, Violet, what do you know about the 'Cambridgeshire'?"

"Willie is always talking about it," answered the girl. "He says he has ten pounds on the horse at ten to one, and if he wins he means to buy a horse for the hunting season."

"Very like the story of the basket of eggs," laughingly answered Ronald, amusing himself by plaiting the showers of rich chestnut hair which streamed over his sister's shoulders. "Marshal Saxe is second favourite at present. I am going down to Newmarket with uncle to see him gallop. Henry is very angry because he was not asked also. Uncle seemed to wish me so much to go that I could hardly refuse; we go the day after to-morrow."

"It is very late, Ronald," said his sister after a long pause, as she rose from her chair and drew her dressing-gown tightly round her graceful little figure, "and I promised to correct Mabel's French exercise for the morning. Do you know," she continued, with a slight laugh, "that I really believe

Aunt Margaret has made up her mind you shall marry Maude. Have you never noticed how she always tries to leave you two together, and is always coupling your name and hers?"

"You little scandal-monger!" laughed the boy, as he too left his chair. "No, I have not noticed it, but you may make your mind quite easy upon that point. Mabel is much more to my taste than Maude, but neither pleases me over-much. When I do marry I hope I shall find some pretty, sensible person like yourself. Maude's whole soul seems bent on her appearance."

"Lady Linden seemed quite angry the other afternoon when Sir Seymour Hastings called," replied Violet, as she brushed the heavy masses of hair off her temples. "He would keep talking to me the whole time, all about yachting,—of which of course I know a little,—and he asked if I might go over and see Ainsworth, his place. I should have liked to go, I have heard it is such a

grand old hall; but Aunt Margaret got cross, and said I was not sixteen, and in the school-room, but that Maude and she would drive over. Sir Seymour asked if I might not come too, but Lady Linden sent me up-stairs, and seemed quite annoyed with me. What could it be all about, Ronald?"

"I don't know," muttered her brother, as he lit his candle; "her ladyship is always very polite to me, but I don't like her; and look here, Violet, if she makes you uncomfortable, mind you tell me. After all I am heir here, not Henry, though a stranger would hardly credit it; and if you are annoyed by any one, by Jove I'll make them understand who will be future master here! But good night, darling; if you want to go to Ainsworth you shall. I'll order our ponies in the morning, and I don't think her ladyship will try to interfere with *me*," he continued vindictively.

* * * * *

"Where are you going, may I ask, Violet?" inquired Lady Linden, as after a late break-

fast in bed she appeared in the breakfast-room, where Ronald and his sister were ready dressed for riding, and apparently about to start on some expedition.

"I am going to ride to Ainsworth; Seymour Hastings wrote to me yesterday and asked me to go over and see his yearlings," replied Ronald, rising from his chair on his aunt's entrance; "and Lady Hastings especially invited Violet; she knew our mother years ago, and made a point of Violet coming with me."

"Oh! indeed?" ironically answered Lady Linden; "and so of course you accepted without so much as consulting me? You know, Ronald, that I very much object to Violet's gadding about alone, and if you are going to look at yearlings I should think she would be very much out of place."

"I don't see what harm she can come to with me, and as Lady Hastings' guest," drily replied the boy, walking to the window. "I shall be going abroad soon, Lady Linden, and

I wish to have my sister with me as much as possible before I go. The horses are at the door, Violet, so if you are ready we will start."

"Well, if you will take her, I suppose you will," almost angrily retorted Lady Linden. "I suppose you will not be back for luncheon, Ronald, and Henry has asked Captain Summers especially to meet you; it certainly is most tiresome."

"I dare say Captain Summers will get on well enough without me," laughed Ronald, as he turned to leave the room; "and if Henry wants to drive anywhere, aunt, I wish you would tell him that he is welcome to take those chestnuts of mine; he is always admiring them, and they want work."

"It is very kind of you, and I am sure Henry will be delighted," answered Lady Linden, a smile crossing her hitherto angry face; "he might drive them to meet Captain Summers. Mind you behave properly, Violet; I am sorry Maude is not going with you; she would have looked after you."

"Maude hates riding, she said so the other evening," interposed Ronald, before his sister could reply; "so of course I did not ask her."

"I am sure she would have been delighted to ride with *you*, Ronald; but of course she does not pretend to ride like Violet, who never seems happy unless she is capering about on some unmanageable horse," drily returned Lady Linden. "Dear me, there is Mabel tearing across the lawn after Willie! that boy will make the child as great a nuisance as he is himself."

"You managed that very well, Ronald," laughed his sister, as the two cantered over the level green ride which led to the main entrance; "the chestnuts quite restored Aunt Margaret's temper."

"It is better to please than to cross her," answered the boy lightly. "I am very glad we are spared the company of Captain Summers; the truth is, I believe Henry owes him a lot of money; I can't stand the man,

and I should have thought him the last person to go down with her ladyship. Look, Violet, those are the Ainsworth woods; what a splendid place it is, almost as fine as Estcourt."

Far away below, nestling amid the dark green woods, lay Ainsworth Abbey; its mullioned windows, sparkling in the rays of the sun like sheets of molten gold, gave the whole place the appearance of being in flames. The soft sombre grey walls, covered with ivy and different rare creepers, stood out from the surrounding green and copper beeches in bold relief, looking when viewed from a distance like a pile of grey and massive crags of numerous fantastic shapes hurled by some giant's hands amid the surrounding woods. A glorious old English abbey, of which there are now few indeed, and therefore more to be prized.

"And so you really have come; I am so glad!" joyfully exclaimed the young owner of the Abbey, as he met his two guests at the

entrance to the great hall. "Miss Eskdale," he added laughingly, "I was afraid you would not manage it. I have got that plan I told you about of my new yacht, and want your opinion upon it. Never mind the horses, Ronald, one of the men will take them round to the stables. Come in; I want to introduce you to the mother, and then we will take a look at the yearlings before luncheon."

"What a lovely old hall!" exclaimed Violet, as after following the young baronet through the entrance she stopped to admire the richly-carved oak ceiling and walls; "much finer even than Estcourt."

"Ah! well no, hardly so fine as Estcourt," dubiously replied the happy owner, "but it *is* a fine old hall, and I am very proud of it. The old monks used to eat in here, Miss Eskdale, and all that tapestry was made in their time; but here comes my mother—let me introduce you to her."

"My dear child, I am very pleased to make your acquaintance," began the old lady in

a kind soft voice, as almost instinctively she drew the girl towards her and kissed the flushed, happy face. "My dear child, how like you are to your mother; I could almost declare that Madelon Scott stood before me as I saw her last. Yes," continued Lady Hastings musingly, as if to herself, "the same lovely face and perfect figure as poor Madelon."

Some people have a peculiar attraction about them, even though they be total strangers, and looking into the sweet kind face before her, Violet instinctively felt that in Lady Hastings she had found what her whole nature craved for—a real true friend.

"You knew my mother, Lady Hastings?" she inquired in a low, earnest voice.

"Yes, well; but long ago, before she married, when she was a child like you," hastily replied the old lady. "You are very like her, my dear; and is that your brother? I am charmed to know you both. But were there not three of you?"

"We left Willie at Estcourt, Lady Hastings," laughingly replied Ronald. "Willie is a sad pickle, always in mischief, and Violet did not like to trouble you with him."

"Boys ought always to be in mischief," gaily answered the old lady; "Seymour always was," she went on, glancing lovingly at her son. "I love boys to be in mischief and scrapes, it does them good; but come, dear, would you not like to wash your hands before luncheon? Seymour will inflict all his yearlings and yacht plans upon you if you allow him, but not till after luncheon; it is half-past one now."

Since the death of her mother Violet had never spent a pleasanter day.

The beauties of Ainsworth, the paddocks and stables, were all explored by her. The plans of the new yacht were placed before her, and duly admired and explained. "It wants but a name," exclaimed Sir Seymour Hastings as, after having gone all over the vessel from stem to stern, the various drawings were laid

down. "And it must be a nice one; what shall it be, Miss Eskdale?"

"A name!" interrupted his mother; "now, Seymour, I was to choose the name, and I don't mean to give up my privilege. What say you to Violet?—call her The Violet."

"Violet," softly murmured the young baronet, half to himself. "It is a pretty name, and if you will allow it, Miss Eskdale, Violet it shall be."

"If you like, of course," replied the girl with an amused laugh; "but I think we could have found a more appropriate name. Oh, Ronald, there are the horses! I had no idea it was so late; I suppose we ought to think about starting."

"You must come and see me often, my dear child—whenever you can," exclaimed Lady Hastings as she said good-bye. "Now mind, you are not to treat me as a stranger; come as often as you can. Good-bye; take care of yourself. I should like to keep you

always here, but I suppose Lady Linden would not allow it."

"Good-bye, Ronald; I shall come over and see you on your return from Newmarket," exclaimed Sir Seymour as he shook hands. "Good-bye, Miss Eskdale; remember you are pledged to come on The Violet in her first cruise."

CHAPTER IV.

NEWMARKET—dear, quaint little town! how many happy days have not we seen in you! Peerless for racing, and peerless for quietude, for your size there is no town to be compared to you. Those who have only visited this far-famed spot during the hubbub and turmoil of a race week can have no idea of the utter silence which prevails during the recess. Everything and everybody at Newmarket wears a certain air of importance and secrecy—from the great trainer of a priceless stud down to the little stable lad some five stone two pounds, with the strut and air of a half-fledged game bantam.

Our feeble powers of description would do

small justice to Newmarket, with its wonderful expanse of down and glorious life-restoring breezes. To those who know not the place, our advice is, go there, live there, keep a stud there, and if possible die there.

The long string of thoroughbreds belonging to Lord Linden were located at the far-famed Wizard Stables, under the management of that cleverest of trainers, Mr. George Farland. Poor old George—who among racing men did not know his jolly rubicund visage and portly appearance? He is dead now, and his place has never been filled, although his two brothers both realize the ideal of what an honest, straightforward trainer should be.

The journey down from London had been performed by the Earl and young Ronald by special train, Lord Linden not wishing to arrive before the shades of evening should completely shroud his approach.

"Horse-racing, Ronald," said the Earl, as their special stopped at Cambridge to water, "can never be carried on too secretly. No tout

or horse-watcher has, I dare swear, ever got the best of me. You, Ronald, if anything should occur to me, would be the possessor of one of the finest and, though I say it myself, best selected studs in England, and therefore in the world. I wish, my boy, you were not going abroad; I shall miss you very much, and though I say it, none could better educate you in the perilous game of racing than myself. You will see Marshal Saxe tried; he is a good horse, and we have a line by old Longshanks, who ran the Cæsarewitch winner to a neck at Lincoln. We shall gallop seven of my horses, and if at the weights I have fixed Marshal Saxe gets his head in front, then, Ronald, Marshal Saxe will win the Cambridgeshire, and give his field fifty yards' start."

"What are the weights to be, uncle?" carelessly asked the boy as he turned over the leaves of *Bailey's Monthly*.

"The public, I see, back the Cæsarewitch horse pretty freely, and Whinblossom is second

favourite—the public are generally right, are they not?"

"In my humble opinion the British public are fools," sharply retorted the Earl. "The Cæsarewitch winner carries fourteen pounds extra, and speed is certainly not his forte; Whinblossom carries seven stone ten pounds, our horse seven stone three pounds; and if Marshal Saxe does what Farland and I shall ask him, then Whinblossom could not win with seven stone on her back."

"Willie understands more about racing than I do," said Ronald, good-naturedly. "Henry has taught him all he knows, and——"

"Then Willie knows nothing," sharply retorted the Earl, "for certainly Henry does not. But I do not wish Willie to take to the turf. He has no money, and I can leave him none; you will have to provide for him. He is a young scamp, and yet I love the boy," he went on heartily. "As it is, he is always wanting money. Not that I grudge it to him, but he must learn presently to live upon a

fixed sum; he will have nothing except what you choose to give him, Ronald."

"Then he won't be badly off," gravely replied the other. "Violet and he are all I have in the world, and Willie shall always share with me."

"That is, if you will pardon me, utter nonsense," calmly went on the Earl. "You, of course, will marry, and have many calls. If you allow Willie two thousand a year it will be ample; in fact, you will find yourself unable to do more; but here we are at Newmarket. I suppose the carriage will be here to take us to Harcourt Lodge; and to-morrow, Ronald,—early, mind,—we will see this rough gallop."

"When will you see Farland, uncle? Gregory wants to know," inquired Ronald, as the two alighted at the door of Harcourt Lodge. "After dinner, I suppose?"

"Yes, after dinner; say nine o'clock," replied the Earl, as he made straight for his sanctum. "Don't dress, Ronald; dinner is

ready, and the soup will get cold. Nothing so nasty as cold soup."

"Well, I must say your cook here is a trump!" exclaimed Ronald, as after dinner he drew an arm-chair towards the fire. "What a good dinner he gave us! Do you wish to see Farland alone when he comes?" he continued, glancing at the clock; "because, if so, I will clear out."

"Certainly not; I wish you particularly to be present," returned Lord Linden. "I want you to learn how trials and gallops are arranged. Good cook, did you say? Well, I believe he is a fair one; but I certainly considered that woodcock was far too dry."

"Here is Farland, I suppose," said Ronald, as after a sharp knock on the door the famous trainer, unaccompanied by any servant, entered the room, and after carefully shutting the door, advanced to shake hands with his employer.

"You say you wish me to stop, uncle?"

"Yes, certainly. Farland, this is my eldest nephew, Mr. Eskdale," answered the

Earl, "come to have a look at your horses; and as he will be the future proprietor of our stable, of course we have no secrets from him."

"Very glad to see you, sir," gravely exclaimed the trainer, as he respectfully shook the hand extended to him. "You have come with his lordship to see the Marshal have a rough turn up, sir? Well, I hope he will satisfy us."

"Port, I suppose, Farland?" asked Lord Linden, as he rang the bell. "A bottle of '48, eh?"

"Nothing better, my lord," briefly replied the famous trainer. "I never touch anything else."

"It certainly is a grand wine," answered the Earl, as the butler, having brought the bottle, retired noiselessly from the room. "Now, Farland, help yourself; there are some dry biscuits. And how about Marshal Saxe?"

"The horse is well, very well, my lord," briefly answered the other. "Has your lord-

ship decided upon the weights to be carried, or am I to set the task?"

"Here is a paper of the weights and horses," replied the Earl, as he handed a piece of paper to the trainer. "Madge Wildfire five stone ten pounds, lowest weight; the Marshal eight stone twelve pounds, top weight."

"Hum, yes; certainly," muttered Farland, as he quietly looked over the slip of paper. "Seven horses in it. Harlequin is coughing, but I can put Bess of Bedlam in instead. The trial is good, my lord, very good; and if Marshal Saxe beats Longshanks he will win the Cambridgeshire, but ten pounds is a lot to ask him to cede and his year. Knowing the horses as I do, I could make a goodish bet I could place them: Longshanks first, Marshal Saxe second, and the Bravery Filly third. But, however, the Marshal is uncommon well; and if he does win this trial, then, my lord, we need not hunt far for the Cambridgeshire winner. Or if he is beaten half a length either."

"Fordham riding him will be certainly a couple of pounds in his favour," answered the Earl. "I studied the weights well, Farland, but alter them if you choose."

"Certainly not; I am partial to a high trial," quietly answered the trainer. "Then to-morrow at seven o'clock, my lord, over the Cambridgeshire course, and I am sure I hope the horses will do what we ask. I should like your lordship to notice the Bravery Filly to-morrow; six stone ten pounds I see you have given her. In my opinion she is very smart."

"I will; seven o'clock at the top of the town. Good night, Farland," replied the Earl. "Come, Ronald; early hours always at Newmarket."

A cold, damp, misty October morning is hardly one on which early rising would be chosen. Nevertheless, at a quarter past six Lord Linden and Ronald descended to breakfast. The former, a real old veteran, contented himself with a cup of coffee and an egg; and a smile passed over his still good-looking face

as he watched the heavy breakfast which, even at that early hour, his nephew managed to put away.

"And now, Ronald," he remarked, as they mounted their hacks, and rode to the 'top of the town,' "here is the paper of the weights and ages of the horses. Ask me no questions on the ground, and please return that paper when you have looked at it. Many a man would give a thousand to know its contents. But there is Farland with the horses. Remember, not a word more; it is surprising how weights and trials get known."

"Everything is ready, my lord," exclaimed the trainer as he rode up. "The jockeys are weighed, but none know the weights except Fordham. Of course I told him, and he weighed himself. The Bravery Filly will carry seven stone, my lord; I thought you would have no objection, and I really wish to see if I can get to the bottom of the mare."

"Certainly, Farland, certainly," replied the Earl. "Any alteration, as I told you, you

were welcome to make if you chose. Get the horses stripped and start them below, it is infernally cold here. Tell Martin to make the pace hot on Franctireur. Mr. Eskdale and I will of course remain here to see the finish, but you, Farland, go with the horses and start them."

"They are off, uncle!" broke in Ronald, excitedly, after ten minutes' delay, as he watched the small group of horses through his glasses, "and Franctireur is well in front. What a pace he is going!"

"Yes, but they have not gone a couple of hundred yards yet," quietly responded the Earl, as through his powerful glasses he watched the approaching horses. "See, Ronald, the Bravery Filly has run into second place. Farland believes in that youngster, and I suppose Martin has his orders, but she never can stay that pace home with Marshal Saxe and Longshanks."

"What a tail! You handicapped them too heavily, uncle," went on Ronald, as half

way up the straight the seven horses were seen straggling further and further apart. "There are only three in it, and the Bravery Filly is going best of any."

"That is according to your uneducated ideas," sharply returned the Earl. "I weighted them so as to deceive the touts, but the Bravery Filly will never beat either of the old horses."

"That filly gallops well," muttered Fordham to himself, as he shook up his mount and prepared to close with what he knew was the trial horse, Longshanks; "if she can stay that pace home she will beat me quite a length."

A furlong from home, and the three raced head and head together, but the eagle eye and famous judgment of pace of Fordham showed him that in Longshanks he had no longer an adversary. That great horse had been utterly chopped by the pace; and his jockey, knowing further punishment was useless, wisely eased him. But do what he could

the 'demon' could not shake the Bravery Filly off, and sitting down resolutely one hundred yards from home, the two ran a neck and neck race home together.

"I'll bet one hundred on the filly!" recklessly exclaimed Ronald, as the two approached their stand head and head. "Why, it is a hundred to one on her!"

"And I would lay ten monkeys on Fordham," quietly returned the Earl. "There, I told you so, no man can time a finish better than he can. Marshal Saxe has won a neck, I should say, and if he wins the Cambridgeshire, the Bravery Filly will win the Oaks and Leger."

"The race *may* be a false run one, my lord; I don't know, but I do not believe so," exclaimed the trainer. "Longshanks was well, and Coates tells me ran well till the pinch came. My opinion is your lordship will win the Cambridgeshire, and that you have the best two-year-old out this season."

"I hope so, I am sure," heartily returned

the Earl. "But we will wait until the Cambridgeshire, and then if Marshal Saxe wins we know, bar accidents, we have the Oaks and Leger in our hands for next year. But I am afraid the race was a false one."

"Well, I am not," obstinately returned the great trainer. "Franctireur I know was well, and is a fast horse; he simply could not live with them; Longshanks is well and in form; he did not give way until two hundred yards from home. Believe me, my lord, Marshal Saxe has improved, and the filly is one which will take a lot of beating; at the weight your lordship gave her she would nigh have won."

"I have great faith in your judgment, and shall back the horse accordingly, Farland," replied the Earl. "Come, Ronald, let us get home; Fordham, come and see me before I leave Newmarket."

"You think Marshal Saxe ran well then, uncle?" asked Ronald, as the two turned their horses' heads for home. "He seemed to me to have all his work cut out to beat the filly."

"Longshanks in the Cambridgeshire at seven stone four pounds would be first favourite," curtly replied Lord Linden, as, pulling his hack into a walk, he proceeded to light a cigarette. "And this trial represents him in at six stone twelve pounds. Yes, Ronald, Marshal Saxe did what I asked him, and easily too. Unless there is a dark flyer of which we know nothing, he will win the Cambridgeshire, and pretty easily. The filly pleased me very much, and I must find a name for her. Stop! you shall name her—by Scottish Chief out of Bravery. What shall it be?"

"By Scottish Chief out of Bravery," mused the boy, as he thoughtfully patted his horse's glossy neck. "Let me see—call her Bannockburn. She could not have a better name."

"Bannockburn be it, then," cheerfully re-replied the Earl. "The name is a good one, and sounds like winning. Nothing like a good name for a horse; I believe the beasts know it themselves."

CHAPTER V.

THE office of head-ranger at Estcourt was one of considerable dignity and no mean value. For centuries, and, in fact, almost ever since the Estcourt property had come into the Linden family from the House of Percy, had the office descended from father to son. As chief of the numerous staff of keepers, foresters, and watchers, the appointment was one of considerable responsibility and importance, in fact, more like the post of seneschal in the olden days than the place of head keeper in the present generation.

The father of the present official had married the daughter of the rector, and such was the respect in which the post was held,

that it had in no way been considered a bad match for Miss Thornhill, for such was the lady's name before she changed it for that of Chandos. One child, a son, had been born to them. On the death of his father George Chandos had, at the age of thirty, as if by hereditary right, stepped into the vacant situation.

Proud of his position, and carrying back his pedigree to a date which would have caused envy in the heart of many a mushroom peer, George Chandos' matrimonial ambition ran high. He could trace his descent back for three hundred years to that Chandos who was standard-bearer to the great Hotspur, Earl of Northumberland, and was slain in England when the Earls of Douglas and Northumberland for once banded together. But all his proud resolves and high-flown dreams vanished before the pretty face and alluring ways of Miss Cora Hambling, daughter of one of the largest tenant farmers on the Estcourt property.

Farmer Hambling, a real good old tenant of past days, was delighted at the match—to be father-in-law to the chief ranger of Estcourt being in his eyes an honour not lightly to be declined. On the death of his wife, some four years after the birth of their only child, George Chandos resolved never to tempt his fate again, but at his death to allow the office of ranger to go to his daughter's eldest son, if she had one.

One year before the death of his wife, George Chandos had been suddenly called to London, and had returned somewhat moody and ill-tempered, bringing with him a baby hardly a year old. In vain the neighbours sought to find out who this new arrival might be, George Chandos resolutely declined to answer any questions; and as his wife cheerfully adopted the infant as her own, what did it matter to the surrounding people?

Little Viola Chandos, for so the child was named, grew up with her supposed parent and sister as one of themselves, and as years

rolled by, was looked upon by every one as belonging to the family.

Jessie Chandos, about three years older than her sister, delighted her father by marrying at the age of eighteen a highly eligible young farmer, and the birth of twin boys gave fair promise of leaving no vacancy in the coveted post of ranger.

Viola, however, seemed fated to give George Chandos more trouble than her sister. At fifteen years of age she began to display an amount of self-will unknown before in the family. A prettier child, every one admitted, was not to be found in the northern counties; but many argued that her proud ways and pretty face combined would eventually lead her into trouble.

At fourteen she had read every novel on which she could lay her hands, and to the horror of her father, had cut her hair short, upon the plea that it was too thin, though a more luxuriant crop would have been hard to find.

Play with the surrounding children or farmers' daughters she would not; but readily accompanied young Willie Eskdale in many a secret picnic and mischievous expedition. Her lovely face and pretty ways had made her a great favourite with Lady Linden, and even with the Earl himself.

The child, however, was a source of anxiety, amazement, and irritation to her father. Once and only once did he try to remonstrate with her upon making a companion of the nephew of his master, which he saw was exciting much jealousy and gossip in the neighbourhood.

In this argument Viola, however, got decidedly the best of it.

"Willie likes me to go with him; if you object you had better tell him so," replied the young lady, pettishly. "He is coming this afternoon to drive me to the Far Glen. You had better tell him, for I shall not."

"I certainly consider it extremely disrespectful of you to call Mr. William Eskdale

'Willie,' Viola," replied the astonished man. "I wonder you are not ashamed of doing so. It is no use for me to talk to Mr. Eskdale, he would only laugh at me; but you ought to know better."

"He told me to call him Willie; he calls me Viola," replied the child impatiently. "I like him; he gives me such pretty books to read, all about London, which must be like fairy-land, and the plays and theatres. Oh, how I wish I could go to them!"

"You are certainly mad," replied Mr. Chandos, angrily. "But, thank goodness, Mr. Willie will be off again soon to his tutor. He is not a fit companion for you, Viola, as you ought to know. No good can ever come of making companions in a position so very much above you."

"He likes me and I like him," retorted the child, as she threw her head back with a pretty wayward gesture; "and he understands me, which these stupid people about here never do. Willie read me the whole

of the 'Corsair,' and other bits of Byron. Fancy, Jessie has never even read the 'Bride of Abydos.' How I should like to see Greece!"

"You shall see school, and that speedily," returned the bewildered man. "Greece and Byron! You *must* be crazy, Viola. But you shall go to school; I must consult Jessie about it."

"Here comes Willie; and oh, father, he is driving those beautiful chestnuts of Mr. Eskdale's!" joyfully exclaimed the girl, as she flew to the open window. "I shall go and put on my hat, so as not to keep him waiting."

"How are you, Chandos?" exclaimed young Willie Eskdale, as, throwing the reins to the groom, he swung himself from the mail phaeton to the ground. "Where is Viola? She promised to come with me to the Far Glen and look at the new decoy."

"Viola is gone to get her hat, I believe," returned the head ranger, placing a chair for his young master. "There is no use in

your going to see the new decoy, Mr. William, because it has not been put up yet. And another thing is, sir," he continued, awkwardly —"no offence, Mr. Willie, but I do not like Viola driving about the country with you. It quite turns the girl's head; and seeing her driving about behind a pair of horses makes other people talk. And—and, Mr. William—" and here, seeing the laughing eyes of the boy fixed full upon him, Mr. Chandos came to a somewhat abrupt stop.

"Well, go on, I'm listening, Chandos," urged the boy. "What do you suppose I am going to do?—run away with Viola, chestnuts and all? Come, now, tell me what it is. What has put these extraordinary ideas into your head?"

Few, very few could look into Willie Eskdale's bright open face and fail to be impressed with the honesty and straightforwardness written in its every feature. And it certainly was not in George Chandos' nature to doubt anybody, least of all one of a house

for which he entertained the most profound respect.

"It is not that, Mr. William," he went on cheerfully. "I never thought for one moment that you would lead the child into mischief; but your positions are widely apart. Viola is of a very romantic nature, and this lifting her out of her proper sphere is simply spoiling her, and makes people get jealous and say unkind things about her. She is very young—only fifteen; you yourself are not much more than a year her senior; but tell me, Mr. Willie, what would the Earl say if he knew that his nephew made a companion of his ranger's daughter, drove her about in his phaeton, and treated her as his equal?"

"Oh, bother the Earl," hastily exclaimed Willie, a flush passing over his face; "what has he got to do with it, Chandos? I like Viola, and Viola likes me; what harm can there be in our going about together? At any rate you won't object to our going to the Far Glen to-day. I promised her I would take her."

"Well, no, I have no objection for this once," quietly answered Chandos. "But, Mr. Willie, I must put a check on the child soon; she horrified me yesterday by expressing her determination of going upon the stage. But here she comes, so I will say no more at present. You will not keep her out late, will you, Mr. Willie?"

"Oh, let me drive," eagerly asked Viola, as they scrambled into the phaeton. "I should so much like it—do!"

"Certainly, if you like, but don't touch Vengeance with the whip," said her companion; "I think you will find they pull too much for you, but you can try."

Arriving at the Far Glen, the two young people, after having put up the horses, prepared to saunter idly down towards the mere which lay before them, covered with islets and high reeds.

"So I suppose we shall have no more expeditions together, Viola," began her companion, as seating themselves upon a rough mossy

bank they gazed on the lovely lake below. "Your father seems to have made up his mind on the subject. What a little donkey you were to tell him you meant to go upon the stage! Of course he thinks it was I who put the idea into your head."

"Well, if it was not you, it was the books you gave me," replied the girl. "And my mind is quite made up. I could not exist always in these solitudes; you can have no idea how dull it is. You go back to your tutor to-morrow, do you not? and then I shall have to lead the same humdrum life, day after day, without the slightest change. I really shall not be able to bear it."

"Well, but how could you get on the stage? You know nobody in London, and how would you manage alone?" anxiously interrupted Willie. "Viola, promise me you won't go running away to London without at any rate telling me first. I might be able to help you; but alone you would only come to fearful grief. Promise, Viola."

"I won't promise anything," returned the girl, obstinately. "If I told you where I was, you would tell everybody else. But I really don't know what I shall do yet, except that I certainly could never spend the whole of my life up here. You cannot think how fearful it is: nobody understands me, and nobody cares for me. Jessie thinks of nothing but her children, and that fat, vulgar husband of hers, and they talk of nothing except crops, and the price of great ugly cattle. Nobody would miss me if I did go."

"Yes, I should, Viola," answered her companion earnestly, "you know I should, Viola. You won't go away and not let me know where you are or how you are getting on—promise me you will not?"

"Well, perhaps I will let *you* know," answered the child, a softer expression stealing over her face as she listened to Willie's earnest voice. "But you will have to promise on your part not to tell any one else; if you did I should never speak to you again."

"Of course I should tell nobody—that is, if you really did not wish it," eagerly replied the boy. "But Henry knows more about these things than I do: he knows several managers of theatres, and might help you. Would you mind his knowing, Viola?"

"Yes, I should. I dislike Mr. Burton exceedingly, and would not have him know for the world; he is the last person I should ever dream of asking to help me."

"Oh! very well," replied Willie Eskdale, in a slightly disappointed tone. "Of course, then, I should not tell him; I only thought that he might help you."

"At any rate I should not go at present," went on the girl, gravely; "I should have to make my plans first, and I suppose I should want money; I suppose one cannot live without it, even in London."

"I can always give you money, Viola," said her companion eagerly, delighted at finding something in which he could be of service. "Indeed, I should never miss it; and if

Marshal Saxe wins the Cambridgeshire, which he is sure to do, I shall win a hundred pounds; I meant to buy a horse with it, but I would much rather give it to you."

"And you are the only person I would take it from," returned the child, with a smile. "Dear old Willie, how kind you always are to me!"

"Oh no, I am not, Viola, I am often very cross to you," broke in the other vehemently. "But I never mean to be, and I like you better than anything in this world, better even than Violet; you know I do, don't you, though you *are* always teasing me?"

"Yes, I believe you do, Willie," shyly replied the girl, plucking up handfuls of grass and moss, over which she bent to conceal the tell-tale scarlet which flooded her pretty face and neck. "And I believe you are the only one who really does; at least you are kinder to me than any one else."

What further absurdities this very youthful pair would have indulged in is hard to say,

but as a vehement answer was rising to Willie's lips, he became disagreeably aware of the presence of a third person, and glancing hastily up, met the dark piercing eyes of his uncle fixed full upon them.

Lord Linden had complete command over his countenance and feelings. Unmoved he could see a favourite horse on which he had plunged heavily lose a race by a head; unmoved, or apparently so, he had in years gone by watched the woman he loved best draw her last breath in his presence—the only woman his somewhat seared heart had ever really loved.

And in the present instance this self-command stood him in good stead. If his inmost feelings could have been read, amusement certainly would have been found to be in the ascendant, though mixed with some annoyance and surprise.

But all these feelings he successfully concealed, as taking off his hat to Viola, and returning his nephew's stare of bewildered

astonishment with an easy smile, he stepped forward to where the young couple, too confused to stir, were still sitting.

"My dear child, I did not know you were with my nephew, or I certainly should not have disturbed you so unceremoniously," he began politely. "I found the phaeton at the Far Glen, and the groom told me my nephew was somewhere about, and I thought he could give me a lift home, as I had walked here to mark the spot for the new decoy. Lovely view, is it not? But you will get cold sitting there. Willie," he continued rather sternly, "you should have taken better care of this young lady. Do either of you know what time it is?"

"Ten minutes to five," answered Willie, as he hastily pulled his watch from his waistcoat pocket; "Viola and I came to look at the new decoy, sir," he went on in an explanatory tone.

"Ah, yes; of course. And this is a very pretty spot, is it not, my dear?" cheer-

fully returned the Earl, turning towards the girl. "But it is growing cold; don't you find it so?"

"No, my lord—at least not *very*," replied Viola, who cast an imploring glance towards Willie, as if entreating him to speak. "Yes; the view is very pretty."

"I shall drive you home, Willie. You will have to get up behind with George," resumed the Earl, as, on the horses being put to, he gathered up the reins. "Come, my child, let me lift you in; that's it, pull that fur rug well over your knees. I am glad to see Willie had the sense to bring a rug for you."

Poor Viola! That three quarters of an hour's drive was long remembered by her as the most uncomfortable she had ever endured. It was one thing to sit beside Willie and chatter cheerfully to him, and quite another to sit beside the dark and terrible Earl, whom from a baby she had been taught to regard almost as a god. To do him justice, Lord

Linden did his best to put her completely at her ease. But the child was shy, and answered only in short, frightened sentences; and never had she felt so pleased at the sight of her own home as when the Earl drove her rapidly up to the door.

"Good evening, Chandos," said the Earl pleasantly, as that worthy himself hastened to open the door. "I have brought you back your little daughter. My good-for-nothing young nephew would have let her catch her death of cold. Good night, my child."

The whole remaining part of the journey to Estcourt Lord Linden spoke not a syllable; and it was not until he had pulled up before the huge entrance-hall, and descended from the trap, that he condescended to do so. Crossing the hall on his way to the library, however, he stopped short.

"Willie, my boy," he began, with the faintest possible smile playing round his mouth, "your taste is very good, and your

young friend is charming, but this sort of adventure will not do at Estcourt. Understand me, Willie, this is not to occur again;" and without another word the great door slammed behind him.

CHAPTER VI.

THE twenty-fourth of October broke fine and clear. It was the Cambridgeshire day, and Newmarket was full to the brim. Never had there been the promise of a more successful meeting; never had a better collection of horses assembled to decide this most important of our autumn handicaps. The weight of money behind Marshal Saxe had slowly but surely raised him to the position of first favourite. Five to one on the Field was a current offer; but notwithstanding the heavy metal laid out for several other well-known performers, the bookmakers declined to lay a point more against the crack of the Wizard Stable.

Accompanied by Ronald, Lord Linden had arrived the evening before. Willie had begged hard also to be of the party, but this the Earl good-naturedly though steadily refused. The day after the events related in our last chapter Willie had been summarily packed off to his tutor, without being allowed even to say good-bye to Viola, much to his disgust and sorrow. In the first outbreak of his grief he had confided the whole of his woes and wrongs to Violet, who tried her best to console him, with, however, but little effect, and he left Estcourt in a very depressed state indeed.

Ten days after the Cambridgeshire Ronald was to leave England on a long tour in the East, and probably after a year would proceed to Japan, after which his movements and plans remained unfixed. In the mean time he accompanied his uncle to Newmarket. Harcourt House had been duly prepared for their reception, as also for the numerous party Lord Linden had invited for the Cambridge-

shire week, though he himself only came down the evening before the big affair.

Two small races had been decided, the last without many spectators, all being busy in studying the cracks, and drawing comparisons, favourable or otherwise, according to their varying opinions.

But one opinion, however, existed about the favourite. He might be leggy, he might not be suited for the Cambridgeshire incline, but none could deny that he was fit as hands could make him.

"And that is a great matter," muttered young Sir Seymour Hastings, as side by side with Ronald he superintended the saddling of the crack. "Violet—I mean Miss Eskdale—asked me to back him for her for ten pounds if I thought he would win. I do think he has a great chance, and so I shall put it on at once, and a monkey for myself as well. It would be foolish to miss such an opportunity."

"The numbers have been drawn, and we

have got a very indifferent place, my lord," explained Farland, as, after giving a final polish to his favourite's shot silk quarters, he turned towards his master. "I shall tell Manvers to come right through with him, and try and get a good place after starting; the horse is very quick upon his legs."

* * * * *

"This stand is a great deal too small for comfort," peevishly exclaimed the Earl, on getting to the top of the town. "Come, Ronald, squeeze into that corner and take these glasses. I have more money on this race than I have had since Formosa's year at Epsom."

Suddenly the hoarse roar of the ring ceased, and men were seen scurrying to places of advantage like rabbits to a burrow.

"They are off!" excitedly exclaimed Ronald, as he brought his glasses to bear upon the distant shimmer of many-coloured silks; "but for the life of me I cannot make out what is in front. It looks like a regiment of cavalry."

"Manvers has secured a very good place next the 'track,'" quietly observed the Earl. "Blueskin and Savoyard are making the pace pretty hot; there is a good tail now."

Like a crested wave, tinted rainbow-colour by the sun, the glittering field now rapidly approached, and already more than one jockey was seen hard at work, causing many a pang of anguish to pass through the frame of several unfortunate backers.

"There are a dozen horses in it now," exclaimed Lord Hardcastle, as he watched the struggling field. "I always said it was about the best bit of handicapping I had seen."

"The favourite wins! the favourite walks in!" now screamed the excited crowd, as Manvers, taking up the running for the first time, showed in front, closely attended by Castillion, Holyrood, Darnley, and Shooting Star.

Ridden by one of England's finest jockeys, Darnley now boldly challenged the favourite;

at the same time Shooting Star and Castillion also challenged right and left. Riding now his utmost, although as yet his whip had never been raised, Manvers stalled off each successive effort; but do what he would, Holyrood still stuck to his girths; and one hundred and fifty yards from home, running gamely under punishment, crept to his neck. Still, though shoving his mount along, and with every stride driving his spurs home, Manvers as yet had never raised his whip hand, and an angry murmur went through the crowd as Holyrood, running with indomitable gameness under the whip, got his head level with the favourite's. Suddenly, and like a flash of light, not two strides from the post, Manvers drew his whip, and struggling gamely, Marshal Saxe in the last stride snatched victory by a short head.

The ever-changing crowd were now enthusiastic in their delight. What in their opinion would have been a race utterly thrown away had the heads been reversed, was now voted

one of the finest races ever seen, and the successful jockey one of the best finishers known.

To do him justice, however, Manvers treated the cheering with which he was greeted with the same utter indifference as he would have hailed a storm of disapprobation had he lost. Once, and only once, did his pale, wan, determined face alter in expression, and wear a gratified look, as, on taking off his saddle to weigh in, he overheard the remark of that prince of turfmen, Lord Hardcastle, to Lord Linden,

"By Jove, Linden, you may thank Manvers that you have won the Cambridgeshire. In my whole career I never saw a better timed finish."

Praise from Lord Hardcastle was rare, and the jockey valued it more than the frantic cheerings of an ignorant crowd, which he well knew would be the first to blame him if, doing all he knew, and riding with exquisite skill, he had been beaten on the post.

"I thought he would have won easier, Farland," quietly remarked Lord Linden, as, stroking his horse's head, he turned towards his trainer. "Holyrood must have come on very fast. Our horse gave him two stone at Ascot, and here only ten pounds. It don't make the Bravery Filly by any means a flyer."

"Well, I cannot agree with you, my lord," bluntly replied the great trainer. "The rest of the field were like a string of geese, and there were some good ones trying, I know."

"I'll take forty monkeys Bannockburn wins the Leger, Apricot," exclaimed Lord Linden, as he entered the crowded ring after crossing the course. "Ah! you don't know her by that name. Well, the Bravery Filly. Will you lay it?"

"No, my lord; but I will lay you fifteen thousand to five hundred," briefly responded the leviathan. "Your lordship had better take it."

"And so I will," returned the Earl, as he

rapidly pencilled the bet. "Come, Ronald; let us get our hacks."

"Racing must be a grand amusement, uncle," exclaimed Ronald, as the two cantered slowly over the crowded heath; "but rather too exciting, I should think."

"At first, yes; afterwards, no," replied Lord Linden. "Racing, Ronald, is like taking stimulants. You get accustomed to it, but still it always remains in a certain degree interesting. That eastern king could not have heard of racing when he offered half his kingdom for a new sensation; racing would have given him plenty of it."

CHAPTER VII.

THREE years have passed away since the events of our last chapter; and, as is usually the case, three years brought round a wondrous change. Well-known men had died and been speedily forgotten, fresh ones having immediately cropped up in their place. But still the world of fashion rolled on in its selfish and narrow limit. Dynasties may rise and fall, countries may be destroyed by war and pestilence, but of what moment is that to the London world?

A new scandal, some fresh bit of ill-natured gossip, lives longer in their minds than the woe and desolation of an entire province. It is certainly marvellous how society for year after year still keeps up its perpetual roll of

what is styled pleasure. Hot and crowded assemblies, stifling balls, and irksome receptions, would, if attending them were compulsory, be put down as an intolerable nuisance. Such, however, not being the case, they are rushed into with a zeal and courage which would do credit to any heathen fanatic; the result being, that at the end of a season the votaries of Vanity Fair wear a washed-out, limp appearance, which it takes several months in the Highlands or at watering-places to eradicate.

The so-called "golden youth" of England in the present day finds but small pleasure in the manly pursuits of his forefathers. A late breakfast, which chiefly consists of soda and brandy and something grilled, is sufficient for the rising generation. A melancholy stroll in the park, with pallid face and feeble expression, highly suggestive of consumption, is considered sufficient exercise. At night a visit to the fashionable play, where, sitting in rows and armed with eye-glasses, he and

his fraternity criticize the actresses, much to the amusement of the latter, and then off somewhere to supper. Such is the golden youth's life. A race between his purse and his constitution, generally ending in a dead heat.

One great change which these three years had brought about was the death of the well-known Earl of Linden. Returning from Doncaster, whither he had journeyed only to behold his crack filly well beaten for the Leger, the Earl had caught a violent cold, which, treating, as he did most things, with contempt, killed him in less than a week. At his death the world pricked its ears, not on his account, for being dead and relegated to the family vault, he was straightway by it forgotten; but many stories had been circulated as to the dead man's successor—stories which certainly would not bear investigation, but which nevertheless were much discussed.

Besides, as one of the richest peers in England, all society was eager to receive him,

and it seemed hard that he should disappoint them.

From the vigilant, hard-worked chaperone, to the needy and very shaky owner of a few race-horses which he wanted to sell, not one but would have joyfully welcomed the new peer. In this, however, they were doomed to be disappointed. At the time of his uncle's death Ronald had been travelling in the wilds of Western Siberia, and the news did not reach him until the Earl had been buried a month.

Not considering it necessary to return only to look at an exceedingly ugly grey vault, Ronald had decided on continuing his travels, determining not to return to England until he was of age. When he at last returned thither, the young Earl at once proceeded to Somerby, situated in the best part of Leicestershire, which he had taken for the hunting-season.

Three years of travel alter most people, and Ronald Lord Linden was no exception to

the rule. He had left England a mere boy of eighteen, full of generous impulses and quixotic ideas, which, however, his travels and the knowledge thereby acquired very soon changed.

Accustomed abroad to have everything his own way, he fully expected that such a state of affairs was to continue in England, and in this he certainly was not doomed to be disappointed, modern society being only too willing to bow down and worship at the shrine of wealth and territorial influence.

Willie, his younger brother,—whom he had once boasted, in his generous boyhood, should always share with him,—he now looked upon in the light in which most eldest brothers view the younger scions of their house.

Willie would require money; he certainly could not well live without it in the Guards, and as, save for the slender sum of ten thousand pounds for which his father had been insured, Violet and his brother were totally

unprovided, naturally it devolved upon him to supply their wants.

A miser Ronald certainly was not, but it annoyed him to have to part with money in some directions. Ten thousand pounds lost upon a bad race meeting, or twice that sum spent upon some pretty face, he never heeded for an instant. But to have to supply money to support his younger brother caused him some pangs of regret.

Violet, we are bound to say, he still remained fond of; but then Violet looked after his house and made things comfortable for him, and in settling the sum of twenty thousand pounds upon her he felt that he was simply doing what he ought to do.

But Willie was different: Willie had debts and bothers innumerable—as indeed what else could the unfortunate boy be expected to have, turned adrift into an expensive regiment and town life, with no certain or fixed sum upon which to exist?

It also annoyed the Earl that his brother

should have a pretty house in town, and a stud of hunters at Oakham—certainly only five in number, but still a stud—with no visible means of supporting the same, and existing, very much like Rawdon Crawley, upon nothing a year. Willie, too, was a pet and favourite with every one; and what was worse, every one seemed to imagine—why Ronald could not understand—that as his only brother and heir presumptive he must be well off.

"Who are coming to-night, Violet?—I mean to dinner," inquired the young Earl, as, after having gone the round of his stables, he lit a cigarette, and placing his arm affectionately over his sister's shoulder, strolled idly towards the house. "Seymour Hastings is coming to stop, is he not?"

"Yes," answered Violet, as a slight flush rose to her cheek. "And there are seven or eight at least coming to dinner. Willie comes this evening, Ronald—he has got leave for three months. Poor old boy how he

will enjoy it! I went over his horses at Oakham this morning, and they were all looking so well."

"Five horses and a hack, and not one paid for, I'll go bail," briefly answered her brother. "I am glad Willie is coming, Violet, for I must really have a talk to him. He must marry an heiress if he intends to go on in this fashion."

"What nonsense, Ronald!" laughed his sister, as she looked curiously into her brother's face. "Willie is not twenty! And why should he marry? Really, Ronald, you must settle a certain amount upon him; he cannot go on as he is doing. Remember, if our father had lived the Estcourt property would have been charged heavily for him, and——"

"My dear Violet, I mean to settle a certain amount upon him," pettishly returned the Earl; "but he and you seem to take things as a matter of course, and I suppose he has debts without end, which he must have known I should be asked to pay. It is very easy for

him to be generous when he is well aware that I shall be the sufferer."

"I don't think he has many debts. I have helped him as far as I was able, but of course he must have some. Put yourself into his position, Ronald, and ask yourself how you would have got on. An expensive regiment, no guardian, no allowance, except a very uncertain one—how do you imagine the boy is to live? The idea is too absurd. Every one knows him to be your only brother, every one knows your rent-roll is enormous, and every one supposes that Willie is in consequence well off. You would be the first to grumble if he did not live suitably."

"Well, don't let us quarrel about it, Violet," good-naturedly replied her brother. "I will make some arrangement with Willie this time; but I know if I pay his debts he will simply run up fresh ones. His method of getting through money is certainly surprising."

"Ronald," began his sister, as a soft look lighted up her beautiful face, and her eyes

half filled with tears, "will you look back to that poor dear little home we once lived in, and will you think of mother, and how she asked you with almost her last breath to look after Willie? And will you remember what you once promised me, years ago, at Estcourt? Do you mean to say that you have forgotten all which happened then? Oh, Ronald, how changed you are!"

"I am not, Violet," abruptly replied her brother, as he half turned away his face. "And you know I would do anything for you. But I will not encourage Willie in a lot of foolish follies. You do not know him so well as I do. From what I have heard and seen his expenditure is ridiculous. It is not himself I grumble about so much, but he supports Viola Chandos. You must have heard of that, and I do not see why I should be called upon to encourage him in absurdities."

"I don't believe it; Willie himself told me it was untrue, and *he* never told me a

falsehood," indignantly replied the girl. "But if you will not do what you ought to do I shall argue with you no more."

"That must be Sir Seymour; he said he would be here at four o'clock," exclaimed the Earl, wisely dropping the discussion. "Well, Seymour, what sport?"

"None; we drew the Curate blank, and ran a ring from the Parson," replied the young baronet. "Lady Violet, you did not lose much by not coming out. Horrid foxes! they never run straight."

"There never is any sport in that Monday country," replied Ronald, as the three turned to walk towards the house. "Seymour, old man, ask for what you want in the house; Violet will look after you. I am just going round to the stables to order the brougham to meet my brother at Melton. I forgot to do it."

"I heard from my mother this morning, Violet," began the young baronet, as, left alone by Ronald, they strolled slowly towards

the house. "She sent you her best love, and talked about coming down here. She finds Ainsworth very dull now I have left."

"You ought never to have left Ainsworth, Sir Seymour," replied the girl quickly. "I told you so before; it is a shame to leave Lady Hastings all alone."

"I found the place so gloomy after you had all left," plaintively answered her companion, "and I wanted to see what Melton was really like."

"But as you have existed there all this time, why leave the old place now?" asked Violet mischievously. "Don't look so solemn; it does not suit you."

"I left because *you* left Estcourt," replied Sir Seymour. "Violet," he added passionately, "the whole place seemed a desert without you."

"Nonsense," laughed Violet, as a rosy flush spread over her face; "fancy Ainsworth a desert! I think it is one of the loveliest places in England. I had to come here to

look after Ronald's house, but there was not the smallest occasion for you to leave your mother all alone. I think it is shameful."

"I came because you came, as you perfectly well know," interrupted Sir Seymour hotly. "Violet, you remember what you half-promised me a year ago. Why will you not marry me now? and why are you always so cold to me before others?"

"Seymour, you know I told you I would hear no more of this," gravely replied the girl. "You know I told you my one care was Willie; and until I see him settled, and as he ought to be, I shall never marry. If you care for me as you say you do you can wait—at any rate for a year. If not, you cannot really care for me."

"But why should Willie prevent it?" eagerly asked Sir Seymour. "You could look after him even better as my wife. We should be in London for the season, and Willie could have our house always open to him."

"It is not that, Seymour. I know you would be good and kind to Willie," heartily and earnestly replied Violet. "I can't tell you *what* it is; I don't know myself, but I feel that Willie will want me sooner or later. I have a kind of presentiment,—oh! please don't ask me any more now, Seymour, I cannot explain my own feelings. If in a year's time you still care for me I will marry you, but give me that year. After all, we are very young—you are only twenty-three, and I am not nineteen. Will you, to please me, leave it so?"

"Your wishes are my law, darling," quietly answered the young baronet, as a sad, wistful look passed over his face. "But I shall go to the deuce if I have no one to look after me. I lost seven thousand at the October Meeting; I gamble and play to pass time away, which with you, Violet, for my wife I should never do."

"Then try and cure yourself of those faults for my sake, Seymour," answered the girl,

gently. "Remember that whenever you are playing high you are grieving me, and if you really care for me you will not do it. Thank you so much for sending Cover Point for me to ride to-morrow," she continued, as if anxious to change the conversation. "I do hope we shall have a run; he is such a charming horse."

"I brought him down specially for you from Ainsworth," said Sir Seymour, more cheerfully. "He is as thoroughbred as Blair Athol, and never puts a foot wrong. He jumped the railway rails in and out with me last Thursday below Twyford; Smith was the only other man who got over, and he broke the top rail; but he was riding a four-year-old."

"Yes; I suppose he is the best light-weight hunter in Melton," laughed the girl, as the two entered the house. "Willie has some good ones, but none like Cover Point. Order a brandy and soda if you want one, Seymour; I am going to have tea. It is a shame to

put your fourteen stone upon the mare; at the best she can only struggle under you."

A dinner in or near Melton is always so exactly the same affair, that to give an account of it would only weary our readers, many of whom have probably assisted at such festivities, or if not, read of them. Needless to say that each individual talked of hunting, and hunting only. Each man strove—but in most cases vainly—to draw attention to the one particular animal he had ridden that day; which said beast, he assured his hearers, he would not take five hundred for, though in reality he would gladly have taken one-third of the price. Verily there is no such secret as that which exists between man and his horse!

Great arguments as usual ensued as to who was really the best man to hounds in or round Melton, the dispute ending, as it always does, in every man keeping his own opinion, *i. e.* that he himself was best, if mounted on his best horse, and allowed a fair start. "Floreat

Melton!" though what with railways and broken men, and with seemingly no new blood coming on, I am afraid it has seen its best days.

* * * * * *

The Cottesmore hounds met at Leesthorpe; and this famous fixture being only four miles from Melton, and seven from Oakham, generally commands a fair attendance. Besides, Leesthorpe means the drawing of the far-famed "Punch Bowl," a cover never blank; at least it never was at the time of which we write, when that true sportsman, "Chicken Hartopp," held sway at Dalby. He has gone now, as in time we all must, to fathom the secrets of another world; but his loss will long be remembered by those who knew him and were honoured with his friendship. May he rest in peace! A bolder, more skilful, or fearless rider never rode the famous grass counties.

Besides the Punch Bowl, Leesthorpe is also associated with the far-famed Ranksborough

Gorse—a cover, we venture to assert, surpassed by none in England, and consequently the globe.

The meet at Leesthorpe is one for which a hunting man generally keeps his two best horses; as, if there is any scent at all, a morning and afternoon gallop is nearly a certainty. Perhaps, with a straight-going fox, a fast burst to Owston Wood, over the cream of Leicestershire, with big fences and large stretching pastures, is enough to satisfy the veriest glutton.

The meet in question was a fairly average one for December, at least, as it was early in the month, many sportsmen not being able to get down until after Christmas. The proverbial southerly wind certainly was not in the ascendant, a rather cold easterly one prevailing—one which made horses' coats stare, and their riders' hands grow numb, while waiting for the fox to break cover.

"Violet, come with me, will you?" eagerly

asked Sir Seymour Hastings, as, on the bitch pack being thrown into the Punch Bowl, a slight whimper announced a ready find. "Cover Point only wants his head, and I always get a start."

"This horse of mine is certainly mad," exclaimed Willie Eskdale impatiently, as, upon his sister nodding assent, he joined the two. "The beast seems to have a mania to charge down into the 'Bowl.' Gently, old fellow, you shall go when they get away," he continued softly, as a burst of music in cover proclaimed that every hound was upon the line.

"He is away!" exclaimed Owen Halliday, as the party on the top of the hill saw the light-brown greyhound form canter easily up the opposite incline. "His point is Ranksborough, for a monkey."

And now a helter-skelter rush for a start was made by every sportsman, as one blast of Neil's horn called the pack from covert, and the pressure of a hundred horsemen

trying to get through one half-open gate was ludicrous in the extreme.

Following the example of Owen Halliday, Willie Eskdale, his horse frantic with excitement, charged a stiff black fence on the top of the hill, which obstacle being safely negociated by about a dozen others, gave them open scope to take a line of their own and join the fast disappearing pack, which raced over the great far-spreading grass-fields beyond.

"What a scent!" exclaimed Sir Seymour Hastings, as pulling his powerful hunter into a hand-canter he went at a nasty flight of rails out of a boggy bottom. "Take care, Violet; let Cover Point alone. Well done!" he added, as, jumping like a cat, the mare slipped over the rails. "Come along, they are literally racing."

Three fields, as it usually does, very soon disposed of two-thirds of the ambitious crowd. Some took to the road, trusting to cut the pack off at Ranksborough. Some looked for a gap in the rails, and some went for a

locked gate; none of the latter ever seeing the pack again that day.

"His point is not Ranksborough," said Owen Halliday, when the hounds, swinging past Pickwell, bore steadily off to the right. "We are in for a good one, that is certain."

Fifteen minutes from Pickwell, with hounds running mute and scent breast high, soon began to tell. So close together as almost to be able to be covered with the proverbial table-cloth, the pack still flew like swallows over the vale. Neil was handy, and so was Jimmy Goddard, first whip, his face as usual beaming with satisfaction. Close to hounds, but a bit wide to the left, rode Sir Seymour, Violet, Willie Eskdale, Smith, and about seven other first men of the hunt. But far and away the nearest, and doing his utmost to keep his place, rode Owen Halliday.

"He gave seven hundred for that horse, and he is worth every penny of it," muttered Lord Dalesborough, catching his horse by the head and putting him at an extremely big,

black, and ugly oxer, over which he got with a scramble. "If they keep on this pace much longer it will soon be a case of U P with me."

Ten minutes more told a fresh tale of distress and woe. Leaving Owston unentered the fox bore away for Oakham, but still the dark woods of Burleigh-on-the-Hill, his evident point, loomed far away in the distance, and with the best horses it was becoming a case of bellows to mend.

One of the best horses out of Melton, ridden by Captain George, was under spurs doing his utmost, but still three fields ahead even from Halliday raced the pack, every minute getting further away.

"Not so fresh as you were!" vindictively muttered Willie Eskdale, as, after ramming his now beaten horse at a big upstanding fence, newly staked, Fairplay landed on his head, and with great difficulty scrambled upon his legs. "How well that Cover Point goes with Violet!—I must get Hastings to give me a mount on him."

"Tally-ho!" joyfully screamed Owen Halliday, as he saw the now beaten fox creeping up the fence-side two fields ahead. "Tally-ho! Come up, horse!" he went on encouragingly, facing an ugly awkward stile; "hit it hard all round—well, never mind, I can excuse you being a bit blown."

"Let them alone, sir—for heaven's sake, Mr. Halliday, don't holloa!" implored Neil, shoving his beaten and distressed horse at the stile, and carrying part of it away. "See, they view him now—who-whoop!"

"The best run I have ever seen, and I've seen a few!" exclaimed Owen Halliday, dismounting, loosing his horse's girths, and turning his head to the wind. "Fifty-five minutes and not a single check! My brush—thank you, Neil. Lady Violet, let me give it to you; I doubt if you will ever own a better."

"Thank you, Mr. Halliday, but I would not deprive you of it for worlds!" returned her ladyship, sliding to the ground. "You

must keep it; certainly no one can dispute it with you."

And now came up the tail of the hunt, some loud in praise of the run, others anxious as much as possible to disparage it.

"I know every yard of the country, my dear fellow," exclaimed Captain Flatwell, "and it cannot have been much. Why, I stayed ten minutes at Pickwell and then caught you up."

"D—d bore," growled Mr. Rasper; "best horse out, and got stuck in a gate; a lady, or calls herself so, slammed it in my face. But it can't have been so very fast, after all."

"You may say what you choose," good-naturedly joined in Sir Francis Brandon. "But Halliday says it is the fastest thing he ever rode to, and he is the best judge I know; for myself, I confess I never could live with them after Pickwell."

"Conceited ass that Halliday," muttered Captain Flatwell. "Always manages to get a start; any man could ride his horses."

"Well, I don't know, he is a good horseman, though," replied Mr. Rasper. "Did you see me jump the big bottom? I pounded him there!" and so ran the conversation amongst the jealous and disappointed ones.

"I'll give you two hundred and fifty for Fairplay, Willie," said Lord Linden, proceeding to change mounts when his second horseman appeared. "My horses are not worth a farthing."

"I gave two hundred — I'll take three hundred guineas for him, Ronald," replied his brother, cheerfully. "Do you want a cigarette?—there is one."

"Thank you. Well, I'll give you three hundred for him," replied the Earl. "I'll never buy a horse from a dealer again."

"I suppose Ranksborough Gorse will be next draw; I shall go home, I have only one horse out," said Violet, as the hounds prepared to move off.

"Then I shall come back with you,"

returned Sir Seymour. "I've got a fearful headache, and have had enough."

"Let us get on to the road, then," said Violet, as the field prepared to move off. "But don't come back to look after me; I can find my way home easily."

"I would rather, if I may. I got a jar getting over that bottom, and my head is splitting," answered the baronet. "Come, Violet, we will go through Oakham."

CHAPTER VIII.

One of the prettiest houses in Kensington was occupied by the now famous actress—Viola Chandos.

True to her childish inclinations and threats, Viola had left her home and journeyed to London, which capital in her ideal notions of the world was the scene of unmixed pleasure and delight. Like many others, the girl had found out, though rather too late, her mistake. And had it not been for the assistance of her old playmate, William Eskdale, she would, in her total inexperience, very soon have come to grief.

Through her young mentor, however, Viola had been introduced to the manager and part

proprietor of one of London's biggest theatres, who, with the eye of a true connoisseur, had at once perceived what a rage her pretty face would soon create. Apart from this, however, the girl was a born actress, and on her first appearance had fairly brought down the house.

Mr. Chandos at first manifested signal disapproval, but finding all his efforts useless, and being aware that unless he actually shut the girl up she would not remain with him, he with true philosophy resigned himself to the inevitable.

This, however, was two years ago, and as we now write Viola Chandos had gained for herself a name of which many might be proud.

Her acting was unanimously declared little short of perfection; and her conduct, and the way in which she bore her increasing popularity, was the admiration of everybody.

Not the greatest or most malicious scandal-

monger could find a flaw in her life, which was entirely devoted to her profession.

On her first appearance, Viola's lovely face and—must we own it?—well-known unprotected condition, had made her a mark for every description of ruffian, from the beardless, sensuous "crutch and tooth-pick," to the older and more wealthy lover, who with bribes and lies had vainly done his utmost to lead her astray.

In Viola, however, they had for once come across a woman impervious to either gold or flattery. Presents and letters were alike returned, without even so much as an answer. Invitations to dinners or suppers were quietly declined, and all advances were treated with the coolest contempt.

"I cannot make it out!" impatiently exclaimed the great Duke of Avondale in the smoking-room of White's, answering one of several questions put to him. "The girl astonishes me, and she looks thoroughbred as any woman I ever saw. I don't mind

telling you, Desmond, but don't tell any one else. She gave me the coolest setting down I ever had in my life."

"Flew into a temper, I suppose?" murmured the burly Guardsman, as he carefully lit a cigarette.

"Not at all; wish she had," vindictively replied the Duke; "women who fly into tempers are not difficult to manage. No, nothing of that kind. I sent her a cheque for one thousand and asked her to come to Paris. But back came an answer to say that Miss Chandos was sorry she could not break her theatre engagement, and to beg me to tell her Grace, *my wife*, if you please, that she was sorry she could not accompany us on our proposed expedition to Paris!"

"She seems great friends with young Eskdale of my regiment," languidly interposed the Guardsman; "I met them riding together at Richmond."

"I am determined to succeed sooner or later," continued the Duke. "Fancy being

baulked by a girl like that! It is all Merryman's fault; he pays her too well for her acting."

Such was Viola's position in the great London world—a world which her childish dreams had pictured as one of the greatest and noblest. Most men, to do them justice, gave her her due, and pronounced her "devilish hard to make out," but still good-naturedly awarded her an unblemished name. Women hated her, and declared her reserve to be all nonsense; and this, perhaps, from their lips, was the highest praise she could receive.

With Willie Eskdale Viola was always friendly and open. To him she confided all her plans and dreams, carefully keeping from him all her numerous annoyances and petty insults. The two were, as they ever had been, the greatest friends, and nobody was more alive to what she owed him in her first *entrée* into life than the girl herself.

Willie, however, was not satisfied with his

position. From very early days he had always liked his little playmate, and as both grew older, his liking rather increased. To be with her at last came to be almost a necessity to him, and when in London he made her house in Park Lane almost as much his home as his own.

To do Viola justice, it must be owned that at first she was slow to perceive the alteration in her companion's manner.

He had always been such a friend of hers; and when she was alone in London, and cast off by her father, he had been the only one person whom she could trust. At first she treated him as a brother, but as time passed on, and her experience enlarged, she was at last obliged to admit, though very loth to do so, that if she regarded Willie as a brother, he certainly did not regard her as a sister.

Slowly though this dawned upon her, yet the day came when Viola realized that her old playfellow and friend was not what he used to be; and painful though the thought

at first was, yet it would be foolish to deny that pleasant dreams grew round it. Dreams of what might have been, but what, with her good sense, Viola knew never now could be. Proud to a fault, she would no more have taken advantage of her old friend's weakness to marry him than she would have taken his life.

That her one friend and companion was by social barriers far removed from her the girl knew only too well; and none knew better than herself that to indulge in such foolish day-dreams could end in nothing but ruin to him and misery to her.

Like many others, Viola chose a middle path. What was the use, she argued, of needlessly paining Willie by refusing to see him again? To let matters take their course was the easiest way. Marry him she never would; but what harm was there in being together as they had always been, at any rate for the present? And if she could not trust in his wisdom, at any rate she could trust her own.

Unluckily, resolutions are easy to make, but hard to keep, especially when that little imp Cupid has any hand in the transaction; for where he is concerned men become foolish, and women—well, women generally get the worst of it, at least in nine cases out of ten they do.

Willie Eskdale, if he had been asked, would heve indignantly and truthfully denied that he had any intention of harming Viola. The girl's beautiful face and charming manner had certainly, as he acknowledged to himself, made a fool of him, but otherwise he at the present moment did not know himself to what his feelings were tending. Heir presumptive to one of the richest peerages in England, the young Guardsman had friends in abundance, and not a chaperone in London but would with pleasure have introduced him to any of her well-guarded charges. Willie liked being made much of—as who does not? but he had a keen sense of the ridiculous, and none knew better than himself that his sup-

posed great prospects and not his individual attractions caused the success which invariably attended his entry into London society.

"Viola, I want you to drive down with me to Richmond; it is a shame to sit indoors this lovely day," exclaimed young Eskdale, on a really bright January morning, when he surprised Miss Chandos in her drawing-room—a pretty snuggery filled with china and hot-house flowers. "I will drive the two chestnuts, and we can fancy ourselves back at Estcourt on one of our old expeditions."

"What a hard frost there must be at Melton to bring you up to London just now!" mischievously replied the girl as she shook hands. "But oh, Willie, I *am* glad to see you! Drive the chestnuts? Yes; at least I shall. I love driving them, and have so few opportunities."

"Well, that is your fault, not mine, Viola," returned Willie, eagerly. "You know I

offered them to you for your own, and you would not take them."

"Certainly not, sir," laughed Viola, looking up to her companion's earnest face. "I have troubles enough already, and enemies enough too. What would people say if they saw me driving about behind your well-known matchless chestnuts?"

"They might, I suppose, say what they chose, and think it too, so far as their shallow brains would allow them," answered Willie, as he carelessly threw himself into a capacious arm-chair. "For goodness' sake, Viola, go away and dress yourself. We shall lose the best part of the day, and it gets dark now soon after three o'clock."

"Will you dine with me here afterwards at half-past six?" asked Viola, turning to leave the room. "I cannot dine later, for I must be at the theatre by half-past eight; but perhaps you are dining elsewhere?"

"And if I were I would send an excuse in order to dine with you," replied young

Eskdale; "but I am not, and your cook suits me. So order dinner, and then we will drive to Richmond. It will do the horses good, for they want work."

"How different the glades and woods look from what they do in summer! and how cold and freezing everything appears!" exclaimed Viola, as, after driving through the favourite little town, the horses' heads were turned towards the Park. "Let me drive back, Willie; I should like it."

"Well, then, you must sit where I am or you will be too low," replied her companion. "And mind how you drive, Viola, they are both very hot. Do you know," he continued, "I rather like winter. Look at the snowy frozen appearance of the trees; don't they look as if they were covered with powdered sugar? And see how many colours the sun reflects on them! Take care, Viola; don't touch Cossack with the whip, he won't stand it."

"They are pulling fearfully; I think, Willie, I will give them up to you again,"

replied the girl as Cossack, indignant at being touched, broke into a canter, and Harebell, his companion, with a snort of indignation, followed his example.

"Rather late," muttered her companion, as, rapidly changing his seat, he took control of the reins. "Sit tight, Viola. It is all right; I'll stop them soon."

The two chestnuts, however, mad with excitement, were now completely out of hand, and from a canter broke into a furious gallop.

Though he did his utmost, Willie had not the smallest command over them, and it was with the utmost difficulty that he could keep them straight. Frightened and irritated by the clatter and rattle of the phaeton behind them, the horses tore along the broad level road which led to the western entrance, where, even should the gate be open, the wall opposite which bounded the right side of the high road threatened a hideous smash.

"Sit still, Viola," came hoarsely from young Eskdale's lips, as with the veins standing out

upon his hands he strove in vain to get a pull at his horses. "If I can't stop them before we reach the Lodge I'll turn them, if possible, into the park."

Two hundred yards from the iron gates, finding further efforts useless to stop the maddened animals, Willie with all his strength tried to turn them from the road, and as his right rein broke with a sudden snap close to the bit, an exclamation of rage and anger escaped him.

Another second, and almost before he was able to realize the situation, the two chestnuts had charged straight at the massive gates, killing themselves on the spot, and with fearful force turning the mail phaeton completely over.

"Are you hurt, Viola?" asked Willie anxiously, gathering himself up from the place where he had fallen, and hurrying to the shattered carriage.

"I don't know, I can't say. What has happened?" asked the girl, in utter bewilder-

ment, raising herself from a pile of rugs and cushions, amongst which she had providentially fallen. "What is the matter, Willie?"

"The horses bolted, don't you remember, darling?" replied her companion softly, as, aided by the lodge-keeper, he tried to raise the fallen carriage. "But if you are not hurt, Viola, we are well out of it."

"I remember now. But oh, Willie, look at the horses!" exclaimed Viola, as the two cnestnuts, lying twisted and distorted in a pool of blood, met her gaze. "Willie, are they dead?"

"Thank God, yes—the brutes!" vindictively returned Eskdale. "But so long as you are not hurt, dearest, what does anything matter?"

"I am so sorry! And it was all my fault," continued Viola, looking sadly, and with a shudder, upon the mangled, motionless horses. "Oh, Willie! will you ever forgive me?"

"What nonsense, Viola!" he answered, noticing her wistful look. "We ought to be

thankful that we are not damaged ourselves. So long as you are all right, I don't care twopence about the horses—ill-conditioned brutes, they might have killed us both! But come, Viola," he went on soothingly, as he saw her sorrowful look still fixed upon the dead horses, "we must walk at once to the nearest hotel; Roehampton is closest. I shall have to send people to clear all this mess away, and we shall want something to take us back to London."

Leaving the spot which might have been so fatal, the couple on gaining the road turned towards Roehampton, giving the bewildered and terrified lodge-keeper charge of the dead horses, the carriage, and furs, all of which he promised to look after until sent for.

"Viola, darling," softly began Willie Eskdale, as they walked on together, "what a narrow escape we had! I could not tell you what I really felt before that keeper—but, Viola, what *should* I have done if anything had happened to you?"

"Hush, Willie, please don't speak so," she interrupted, a sad smile crossing her face. "I know you would have been sorry, but perhaps it would have been better for you if I had been killed or, say, disfigured. Few of my pretended friends would care much about me then," she continued bitterly.

"That is not just, and you know it, Viola," replied her companion, hotly. "You know I love you, and should always love you, whatever might happen. Oh, Viola! I thought you knew me better."

"Willie, I have told you before that I will not listen to this," exclaimed the girl, almost angrily, a flush rising to her face. "And if you wish that we should continue friends you must never talk so again. Love me!" she continued rapidly, "what right have you to speak of love to me, when you are brother and heir to Lord Linden, and I am an actress?"

"If you were a beggar it would make no difference to me," replied Eskdale impulsively,

stopping suddenly in the middle of the road, confronting his companion, and taking both her hands in his. "Viola, my darling, when I told you I loved you, I meant it honestly and truly. I cannot say more than this—will you marry me?"

Loving him as the girl did, the test was a hard and a cruel one; but nevertheless it was one to which she had thoroughly schooled herself, and though for one moment taken aback by the suddenness of the question, Viola proved true to her resolutions.

"No, Willie, I will not," she replied firmly, lifting her eyes to her young lover's face, as she gently, though determinedly, withdrew her hands from his. "It is noble of you to offer to sacrifice your prospects, and good of you to think me worthy such an honour; but I must say no, and that distinctly, and once for all. Oh, Willie!" she added, rapidly, "let us remain the friends we have always been. Leave love alone; it would make us

both miserable. In time you would tire of me, and I—well, I should feel that I was a millstone round your neck. Fancy what my position would be! None of your world would receive me, and after a while you would feel that you had done a very foolish thing. And then—then I should be wretched. Willie, to please me, promise to speak no more of this. Remember how lonely and defenceless I am."

"Very well, Viola," replied her companion in a low, sad voice; "to please you, at present I will keep silence—but even to please you, darling, I cannot help loving you!—though I will not tell you so if it makes you unhappy. You will change your mind in time, Viola, and see things in the same light that I do."

"Never!" replied Viola Chandos, with a determined effort suppressing her own natural regrets. "Never, Willie! Your friend I hope always to be, but I will never ruin your life by marrying you."

"Time will prove," said Willie, as they turned into the little village of Roehampton. "I think you already care for me more than you believe; and if so, I can wait patiently."

CHAPTER IX.

THE hunting season was drawing rapidly to a close, and a better one had rarely been seen even by the oldest living sportsmen. But dying surely though slowly it certainly was. Instead of wet pastures and sticky ploughs the land rode hard and dry, too hard and too dry for scent; and sportsmen, instead of returning mud-splashed and stained, came home with hardly the gloss off their polished boots.

Besides, Croxton Park was at hand, and with that celebrated fixture the hunting world generally disperses until a fresh season sees them again once more at Kirby Gate. Croxton Park Meeting, though perhaps not enjoying such world-wide renown as Newmarket or Goodwood, is nevertheless important to hunt-

ing men. In the Billesdon Coplow meet the flyers of rival hunts: here come the cracks of the grass countries from the Belvoir, Quorn, and Cottesmore. And here, too, many a farmer is to the fore upon some good-looking, well-bred five-year-old, which he has duly qualified with hounds during the season.

Melton Mowbray, however, is generally stronger than most in the way of winning the envied Coplow. And this is hardly to be wondered at when the large studs and priceless hunters from that little hunting town are taken into consideration.

The issue of the Coplow is as keenly and anxiously discussed by Melton men and the surrounding hunts as the Cæsarewitch at Newmarket.

And in this particular year interest was even more greatly roused, inasmuch as the issue seemed to lie between a horse of Willie Eskdale's from Oakham, representing the Cottesmore, and one of Owen Halliday's, representing Melton.

To win the Billesdon Coplow had been young Eskdale's special ambition, and with the small amount of ready money at his command he had purchased at a weeding-out sale at Newmarket a horse which, although admittedly rather too slow for the flat, was considered good enough amongst hunters to win ten Coplows out of twelve. From the great and priceless stud of Owen Halliday he had, however, an adversary worthy of his steel, and between the rival hunts partisanship ran high and bets heavy.

With Willie Eskdale winning the race meant a great deal. In his infatuation for his own mount the young Guardsman had plunged a long way beyond his available resources—available, that is to say, with the allowance made him by his brother, who was able to give or withhold supplies as he chose.

Three months before, on being presented with a list of his brother's debts, Lord Linden, astonished at the amount, flatly refused to pay them. Give him an allowance of one

thousand a-year he did; which, however, when his own income of over one hundred thousand was taken into consideration, was not surprisingly liberal.

And already the burden of debt hung heavily round Willie's neck. Day by day it grew more intolerable to him, and if it had not been for Violet, who did her utmost for him, Willie must have left the Guards.

Two days before the Billesdon Coplow, and when Lord Linden's house was full for the coming event, his brother, urged perhaps thoughtlessly by Violet, obtained an interview with the young Earl, who, very much out of temper at being, as he styled it, disturbed, reluctantly granted it.

"Well, Willie, what is it?" began the keeper of the purse-strings, as, when his brother entered the study, he drew his chair to the fire, and unfolding a paper, uneasily settled himself to read it. "Violet said you wished to speak to me. Anything wrong with Twilight? I hope not."

"Twilight is all right, Ronald," returned the younger brother, apparently totally unconscious of the other's coldness, and drawing his own chair to the fire. "But the fact is, I wish to talk to you. Violet has always done it before, and perhaps I was wrong to allow her. However, I will speak myself now."

"Well, speak on," frigidly replied his brother, shivering slightly and laying down his paper. "What is it?"

"It is not easy to talk if you behave so d—d coldly," returned Willie indignantly. "But you know quite well what it is. I am horribly in debt, and I must be cleared. You can easily do it if you choose, Ronald. If our father had lived I should never have been placed in such an ignominious position."

"Please leave out all nonsense as to whether our father had lived or not," coldly interrupted Lord Linden. "The fact that he did not live is your reason for appealing to me. Your

present request is that I should pay your debts, amounting, I believe, to eleven thousand pounds. I will do so, as I have told you before, but under certain conditions. Why should I pay the rent of Viola Chandos's house? Why should I pay any of her expenses? Give up all that folly, and I will clear off your debts. Give up racing and high play, and I will settle two thousand a-year on you. If you will not, then not one penny will I pay; and what is more, I have a good mind to stop the thousand a year I now allow you."

"You are certainly mad, Ronald!" replied his brother, the hot blood rushing to his face. "No man knows better than yourself that I neither pay Viola's rent nor anything else for her, and it is disgraceful that you should say so. If you will pay my debts and give me two thousand a year I will promise not to play or race, but I decline to make any other promise."

"Why won't you marry Miss Graham?"

continued the Earl irritably: "fifteen thousand a year, and a very nice girl. You ought to be only too glad of the chance."

"Why don't you marry her yourself?" angrily retorted Willie, rising from his chair and walking towards the window. "I hear nothing from you except about her. Thank God I am not mean enough to marry a woman I simply detest."

"I know what I am about, Willie," said Lord Linden coolly, as he lit a cigarette and pushed the case towards his brother; "and I will not pay your debts until I am satisfied as to what your life is going to be. If I paid them now, and gave you two thousand a-year, I fully believe you would marry Miss Chandos. So long as you are crippled with debts and have no income I know you are safe, but she would marry you to-morrow if you were square. Once for all, I won't do it, Willie."

"Then don't," responded his brother, preparing to leave the room. "But don't be

surprised if I go to the bad. The Jews will doubtless give me more than what I have asked you for my prospects. No man knows better than yourself that what you have said about Viola is a lie. And with all your heaps of money, let me tell you, Ronald, I would not change places, if I were also obliged to change natures with you."

"You have backed this mare of yours for a fortune," said the Earl, taking no notice of Willie's angry speech. "If she loses may I ask how are you going to settle? I would do what I could for you, but your method of——"

"Please spare yourself further trouble," indignantly replied Willie Eskdale, halting before opening the door. "If Twilight loses I shall find the means of paying. But I cannot pay my debts, at least not without sacrificing all my future prospects. I hope you will enjoy the thoughts of Estcourt going to the Jews if you have no children."

"It is not that. But, Willie, I should like you to consider," began the Earl, turning

uneasily in his chair. "God bless my soul, what a noise!" as without waiting to hear further his younger brother left the room, slamming the door violently behind him—"The boy must be mad!"

And so matters stood on the eventful morning when a bright sun heralded the day on which the Billesdon Coplow was to be decided.

* * * * *

From an early hour the road which runs between Melton and Grantham had been thronged with vehicles of every description. Every farmer from far and near came with his family to see the famous Billesdon decided. Staunch good yeomen all, men who looked upon sport of all kinds as an institution to be upheld, and though perhaps sometimes a little annoyed at a cut up field of wheat, or sundry broken gates and fences, nevertheless welcomed all comers upon their lands if hounds should cross them, and would rather have killed a prize two-year-old beast than have interfered with a fox, even though that

sagacious animal occasionally took a liberty with their poultry yards.

The arrival of the Belvoir Castle drag upon the ground was the signal that the racing would soon begin, and as the Belvoir huntsman, attended by his two whips, rode down the course, the crowd at once parted right and left, clustering outside the cords in an orderly and sportsman-like manner.

Two races which call for no comment were quickly decided, and as the numbers were hoisted for the Coplow, the crowd evinced greater interest than had hitherto been the case. Although the race was considered by the knowing ones as a simple match between the rival flyers of the Quorn and Cottesmore hunts, still this did not prevent each burly farmer from having his own individual favourite stoutly backed, regardless of the weight of money behind the other two.

"Nineteen runners!" exclaimed Sir Seymour Hastings, glancing from the steward's stand towards the hoisted board. "Willie,

don't you ride your own? He is a tremendous favourite."

"No; Captain Smith rides him—he promised last night," answered the young Guardsman. "He was to have ridden Stargazer, but the beast went amiss. I have such a lot of money on, I prefer his riding Twilight. Halliday has more practice than I, and would outride me if it came to a close finish."

"Nineteen runners, and the ring won't lay a penny over five to four," began Lord Linden in a disgusted voice. "I shall not back yours at the price, Willie. I shall take three to one about Halliday. He says Ivy Queen is not seven pounds worse than Firebrand."

"Of course I have no line to go by; but by the trial Twilight won, I should think he and Firebrand were not far apart at evens," returned his brother. "But the price is absurd. I have got as much as ten to one. Come, Seymour, I want to give Smith his leg up."

"Your horse looks wonderfully well, Willie,"

cheerfully exclaimed his jockey, peeling off his great-coat, and displaying the well-known Eskdale colours of scarlet and white. "How do you wish me to ride him?—there will be a devil of a scramble. I had better keep clear at first."

"You know best, Smith—better far than I do," laughingly replied the owner. "But you know what a lot of duffers are riding; they will be all over the place—most probably cannon or strike into you. I should get off as well as possible, and let them catch you if they can for the first half mile; Ivy Queen is the only horse that will trouble you, I believe."

"Just so," replied the prince of amateurs, as he dropped lightly into his saddle. "I know the course well, Willie, or I ought to. I will pull it off if possible."

"Come to Linden's drag, Seymour," went on Willie, as he turned to leave the enclosure, after seeing his horse leave the paddock. "I shall back him no more; the

price is bad, and I stand a large stake on the mare now."

"What is it? What do you want to do, sir?" exclaimed Mr. Iron, the great Leviathan, when, upon preparing to leave the ring, the two friends got jammed in the crowded gate. "I'll lay you six hundred to four, Twilight."

"No, thank you, Iron, not for me," laughed Eskdale. "I have got too much on already. What I want to do is to get out of this squash."

"I'll take your six hundred to four, Iron," eagerly exclaimed Lord Hardcastle, as he opened his book. "Put it down."

"Certainly, my lord. You too, Sir Seymour?" he continued, questioningly. "That is twelve hundred to eight between you. The field a monkey. Five hundred to two, Ivy Queen."

"What a lot of false starts!" began Sir Seymour Hastings, climbing with Willie Eskdale on Lord Linden's drag, and watching with

Lady Violet the vagaries of several horses at the post.

"There always are, Seymour," returned the owner of the favourite quietly. "There are such a lot of duffers riding. But Custance won't let them go until he can drop the flag to a fair start. They are off now, though," he continued, rather more hurriedly, as the long line of horses broke forward in almost unbroken order. "Smith has got a good start. What a pace they are coming!"

Opposite the old stone wall beyond the stand, the scarlet and white, ridden with rare judgment and discretion, swung round the bend, leading quite a length; and having secured the inside, Twilight, pulling double, and with the rest of the field thundering at his heels, made the pace a cracker. Ivy Queen, King of the Fairies, Bathilde, and Solon Water formed the next division, and as these five swept in close order past the old gorse cover, the experienced jockey of

the favourite speedily pulled his mount into third position.

At his topmost speed Solon Water now shot to the front, and, ridden as if the race were a five furlong one, soon held a long lead. Fast though he went, the jockeys of Ivy Queen and Twilight made not the smallest effort to overtake him, well knowing that before long he must come back to them. The big field now lengthened out considerably, and a fearful tail was apparent, as, rounding the far bend, the leading division, now joined by an outsider, raced close together.

Before reaching the last turn for home, the rider of Solon Water, a young farmer, more at home in the hunting-field than between the flags, was hard at work to keep his mount in front; and as the leaders swung into the straight run home, the lead was for the first time taken by Ivy Queen, closely followed by Twilight, Bathilde, and King of the Fairies, Solon Water having fallen behind even quicker than he rushed to the front. Half way up

the straight Bathilde challenged vigorously for the lead, and heading the favourite, got to the quarters of the Quorn mare. Riding with rare judgment and determination, Halliday, however, refused to be hustled; and Bathilde, beaten by her effort, dropped rapidly behind, her place being instantly taken by King of the Fairies, who with a sudden rush challenged vigorously upon the right, while the favourite, for the first time asked to go, challenged upon the left.

Ivy Queen, however, was certainly gifted with a rare turn of speed, and though much had been taken out of her, nevertheless she stoutly held her own, and warding off the vigorous challenge of King of the Fairies with ridiculous ease, the two favourites joined issue, and ran a slashing race locked head and head together.

"It will be a devil of a race!" muttered Lord Hardcastle, as he watched the approaching pair. "I had no idea Halliday could have ridden so patient a race."

Neck and neck the two, now fifty yards from home, raced together, and as yet neither jockey had raised a whip, though doing all they knew without. Captain Smith, however, had ridden a hundred close finishes to his opponent's one, and as he drew his whip not four strides from the post, a hundred voices proclaimed him the winner.

Inch by inch the favourite drew to the front, and holding his own to the end, won on the post by a short neck, amidst a scene of excitement rarely witnessed at Croxton.

"It is thanks to you that Twilight won," heartily exclaimed the favourite's young owner, his face beaming with delight, as after the "all right" had been pronounced he held his successful friend's coat for him to put on. "How well you timed the finish!"

"Your mare had more in her than the other, Willie," modestly answered the great amateur. "I think now if I had come through with her she would have won easier."

"Come over to the drag and have some-

thing to drink," suggested the young Guardsman; "you must be choked with dust, the ground is like a brick-bat."

"I don't mind a small glass of champagne and seltzer," replied Captain Smith, as he left the weighing-room, "but no more. I am riding in this next race, but I doubt if I shall have such a pleasant mount as Twilight."

"I am almost as glad you have won, Eskdale, as if I had myself," broke in the rough honest voice of Owen Halliday, preparing to follow the two friends from the weighing-room. "I hear you have won a real good stake, and I am heartily glad of it. Your mare must be nearly top class amongst hunters. Nobody knows here how I tried Ivy Queen; but to tell you honestly, I tried her good enough to win any Hunters' National."

"I shall run her at Warwick, and then we shall know what she is," laughed the happy owner of the winner. "Come to our drag, Halliday, and have something to drink after your severe finish."

"If you run her at Warwick you will get beaten—and well beaten, too," replied Halliday. "It is not a fair hunting course. A lot of broken-down, flat racers with a turn of speed win there. Look here, Eskdale," he continued quickly, "I tell you what I will do, I'll make a match over the Aintree course, one hundred a side, or say rather a sweepstake; any *hunter* not a racehorse can enter also, but they must be hunters, not steeplechasers."

"Very well, Halliday; nothing I should like better," returned Willie, as the three walked across the course. "But let the conditions be, none to enter save those which, if they win, will be sold for five hundred pounds. And none which have ever won a race value one hundred and fifty to run, owners up, twelve stone each, and the Grand National course."

"Done; I'll enter Ivy Queen," answered the other; "and under those conditions, Willie, we shall see what a farce hunters' races are.

I'll lay a monkey few will enter a horse at one hundred each under such conditions against either Twilight or my mare. Hunters' races over a country or upon the flat are at present a perfect farce. I should like to see where Rubicon and Starlight would be in a run from Cream Gorse to Oakham pastures."

CHAPTER X.

In a small secluded street leading off College Green, Dublin, was situated the famous office of Messrs. Hardgrip and Son, one of the largest land-agents in Ireland. Hardgrip and Son was, however, a firm of the past, as on the death of his father, Erimus Hardgrip the son had stepped into the entire business.

No firm in Dublin, or indeed in Great Britain, had a larger or more extensive business than the sole head and director of this well-known house. And for this Erimus had his own great talents and undoubted business habits alone to thank.

No land-agent in Ireland was more re-

spected, and perhaps feared, than himself. Trouble and danger he treated with contempt. His duty to his employers was with him a sacred trust, and he carried it out in the most difficult situations with a courage and determination which gained him even the unwilling admiration of his sworn enemies.

Of his many great clients in Ireland and elsewhere, none exceeded in extent of land in Ireland and England Garry Owen, of Garry Castle, justly reputed one of the richest commoners in the three kingdoms. In fact, so large was the estate in mines, lands, and London house property, that Mr. Hardgrip had of late years thrown over many of his other charges, and confined himself almost exclusively to the management of the huge estate of his largest and wealthiest patron.

Thirty years before the name of Garry Owen had been a household word. No greater gambler, *roué*, or more notorious duellist was to be found in the five great capitals of Europe.

But though the proud possessor of all these vices, few mothers but would have gladly welcomed him as their future son-in-law.

As years went on, and Garry Owen seemed in no mood to choose from amongst the many votaries of Vanity Fair, the world grew angry.

What had before, in consideration of his vast wealth, been voted foolish and reckless escapades, were now attributed to love of vice and native wickedness; and each busy tongue vied with the other in abusing him.

To do him justice, Garry Owen seemed to care even less for the world's censure than its praise,. and continued his old life with much the same zest as before.

At a great ball given at the Castle, Garry Owen, however, for the first time in his career, met with one with whom, selfish though he was, he believed life would not be intolerable. Finding the lady perfectly impervious to his marked advances, he became, if anything, still more determined, failure having hitherto been unexperienced by him.

Agnes Gerald, young and totally ignorant of the ways of a world she had just entered, urged by a father whose pockets were empty and whose greed was roused, reluctantly consented to a marriage, which she soon found to her cost a gilded slavery.

Two years passed away, and Garry Owen, who longed for an heir to inherit his vast estates, waxed more and more impatient. When at last he was informed that there was such a hope, his joy was unbounded, and for a time his behaviour to his wife was almost what it had been in the early days of their married life.

The death of his father-in-law, which occurred about this time, was also a welcome event, for besides being now free from persistent appeals to his purse, he felt that the last man who had the smallest right to call his actions in question was removed from his path.

The one idea of a son and heir was now uppermost in his mind; that the child should not be a boy never for one moment entered his mind. For so many years he had com-

manded whatever he wished by the power of his wealth, that the thought that perhaps nature might not be so obliging never for a moment crossed his clouded brain.

Erimus Hardgrip, the only man for whom he entertained the smallest deference, he entreated to be present at Garry Castle. The agent consented at once, knowing better than any one else the temper of his patron, and considering that in case of a disappointment it might be as well that he should be present to check any mad outburst of rage.

Not twenty-four hours after his arrival at Garry Castle, the pleasing task of informing his friend and patron of the birth of a daughter devolved upon Hardgrip, who, determined to take the bull by the horns at once, sought him out, and in a manner peculiarly his own, with a hearty laugh and tremendous slap upon the shoulder, congratulated him upon being the father of the richest heiress in England, Scotland, or Ireland.

The wrath of Garry Owen at the intelli-

gence astonished even the hardened agent, who tried in vain to pacify his furious friend. In a storm of ungovernable temper, which made Mr. Hardgrip for a time seriously doubt the sanity of his client, Garry Owen left the Castle, and for more than a year, save for the heavy remittances constantly drawn through him, the agent would not have known that he still lived.

For three months Mrs. Owen's life hung by a thread. Utterly wearied and miserable, she would gladly have died, had it not been for the one poor little life which had no one but her to look to. The idea of the child being confided to its father to bring up made her sick at heart, and when her doctors informed her that she could not recover, she sent for Mr. Hardgrip. On her deathbed she confided the frail little being to his care as a sacred trust, and well in after life did Mr. Hardgrip carry out her last wishes.

"Never let the child know her father; promise me!" she implored in a low voice.

"Garry will never ask for her; he has returned to his old life, and will soon forget everything. But you—you will see that the child is looked after? Promise me!"

"I promise," quietly and reverently replied the agent. "Have you any message for your husband, Mrs. Owen? He may return, and may wish to know that you forgave him. God knows he has behaved badly, but I cannot altogether blame him. I really do not believe he is answerable for his actions."

But Mrs. Owen answered not, and turning her face to the wall, never spoke again.

The news of his wife's death did not seem to affect Garry Owen. In fact, if the truth were known, he felt considerably relieved. In a letter to his agent he desired him never again to mention the subject. He also added that he never intended to return to Ireland; foreign capitals being much more to his taste, for the future he intended to reside in them. And for seventeen years Garry Owen kept his word.

* * * * * *

In the office off College Green, Mr. Hardgrip was busily engaged upon a pile of papers, which seemed to give him a certain amount of trouble, as from time to time an exclamation of impatience escaped him.

"Mr. Jackson," he began, as his chief clerk entered the room in which he sat, and laid a roll of paper upon the table, "Mr. Jackson, take these papers and get a fresh copy made of them, and the moment Mr. Owen arrives show him up here; mind you do not keep him waiting; and if Patrick Maloney calls you can inform him from me that he can retain his farm at the old rent, provided he lays out five hundred pounds upon buildings: otherwise he can't have it."

"Very good, sir," returned the clerk, opening the door. "You will be engaged with Mr. Owen for the rest of the afternoon in case any one should call?"

"Yes," briefly replied Mr. Hardgrip, drawing his chair to the fire; "yes, Mr. Jackson, see that we are not disturbed."

Left alone, Mr. Hardgrip hastily pushed aside the papers which encumbered his table, and fell into a dreamy reverie.

"Yes," he muttered, "seventeen years since I have seen him, and by all accounts I must expect a great change. Yet what change could make Garry Owen other than he has always been to me?—my best friend, and my chief patron."

Dreaming on, long past days came with a rush upon the musing agent—days long past, in which mad Garry Owen and he had been sworn friends and comrades.

Reckless play, hair-breadth escapes, and needless duels in which they had been associated flashed upon him. Deeds and escapades which he had long forgotten, now that he was once again to meet his old friend, rose distinctly before him.

Clear as daylight rose before him that grey morning, now some twenty years gone by, on which Garry Owen, seconded by himself, had met the most renowned swordsman in

France in a deep, secluded glen in Fontainebleau Forest. The quarrel had merely arisen from a dispute as to which was the best fencer; and it ended in establishing the reckless, devil-may-care young Irishman as the acknowledged best swordsman in Europe. Long-vanished days were these good old days, when the answer to an insult was a duel; and in those days men were consequently more guarded in their language than at present. Dreaming thus, Erimus Hardgrip heard not the violent ring at his office door and subsequent heavy tread upon his staircase; and it was not until Garry Owen had actually been ushered into his study that he became aware of his presence.

Starting to his feet, and with a ready outstretched hand, the agent sprang to greet his visitor. Then, as the light fell upon the bowed, grey-haired man before him, an involuntary exclamation of surprise escaped his lips.

"You don't seem very pleased to see me,

Erimus?" gasped the feeble, wretched-looking object. "Gad, man!" he continued impatiently, "what fearful stairs you have. Get me some brandy, that's a good fellow—I declare I am almost choked."

Without a word the agent placed a case of spirits upon the table; and as he watched the shaking hand with which the once brilliant Garry Owen poured out half a tumbler of neat brandy, an involuntary groan of pain escaped him.

"A d—d fine welcome, I must say," half-sulkily, half-jestingly went on the new-comer, as he drank the reeking spirit. "You find me a bit altered perhaps? You are not much changed yourself, Erimus—the same strong, square-built appearance as ever. How do you manage it, man? I read of your encounter with those Clare devils. Gad, how I wish I had been there! You shot two, Erimus, but you were never so good as myself with either sword or pistol."

"The affair was much exaggerated, Owen,"

replied the agent, recovering from his astonishment at the woeful appearance of the once famous man before him, and trying to lead up to a fresh theme; "very much exaggerated. But tell me, what brings you to Ireland? I hope it is your intention to remain at Garry Castle; the place is in perfect order. I was there only ten days ago. And I hope——"

"Then you hope in vain," snapped the other, as with a steadier hand he poured out more brandy. "No; not any water," he replied indignantly, as his friend pushed a decanter towards him. "I can't taste this stuff as it is. Your fool of a clerk must have watered it."

"What brings you to Dublin, then, Garry," good-naturedly asked the agent, "if you do not wish to remain?"

"What brings me?—why money, of course," decidedly answered Garry Owen, finishing his brandy at one draught, and looking steadily into his agent's face. "You know you wrote and told me last time I required a few

thousands that money was scarce. I never beat about the bush; I want twenty thousand pounds by next week, and what is more, I must have it. I know," he went on, as his eyes dropped before the steady look of his friend, "that I have had a good deal in the last two years, but this money I *must* have. If you cannot get it for me we must sell one of the small properties—say in London; or if that cannot be managed, I can insure my life and borrow upon it."

"If you have come here to talk business, Garry, nobody will be better pleased than myself," drily returned the agent. "But do not let us have any nonsense. You know you are powerless to sell a rood of land; your estates are strictly entailed. Though it may escape your notice that you have an heir, or rather heiress, I do not forget it. And as for insurance—why, Garry, you must know that—well, really, to put it mildly, no office would insure you."

"I know I have an heiress, confound her!

who should know that better than myself?" furiously returned Owen, stretching out his hand again for the brandy bottle. "That is always your reply. That woman has robbed me; but for her I could sell the Welsh and London properties. I have never seen her, and don't wish to do so. I suppose you supply *her* pretty freely."

"To my knowledge, she has never had one penny of your money," rather angrily returned the agent. "You yourself have spent, or thrown into the sea, very nearly a million of money in the last ten years. If this twenty thousand pounds is really required you can have it, but that is only thanks to the great increase in your London property. Don't drink any more brandy, Garry; you will kill yourself," he added hastily, when, on hearing that the money he required could be obtained, Owen once more greedily clutched the now nearly empty bottle.

With a furious imprecation, however, Garry Owen drained the decanter into his tumbler.

and, a sickly look spreading over his face, sank back into his chair in a state of utter forgetfulness.

"And this is the wreck of the once brilliant Garry Owen!" sadly mused Mr. Hardgrip, propping the grey and almost bald head with a pillow, and proceeding to give orders to have him carried to bed. "The best swordsman and the deadliest shot in Europe; poor Garry, a child could beard you now! What a constitution to be wasted in this manner! Twenty thousand pounds," he continued sadly, as he rang the bell. "What for, I wonder? I have sent him, or he has drawn, over three thousand a month regularly. Mr. Jackson," he said aloud, as that worthy answered his summons, "kindly send two servants here; Mr. Owen is not well, and must be taken to my bed-room. If there is a carriage waiting, please to have it dismissed."

CHAPTER XI.

MAY and June had passed away. The Epsom Derby had been decided, and the form of the best three-year-old in England strangely upset at Ascot. Never had the gentlemen of the turf experienced such a fatal meeting. Proverbial for its uncertainties every year, in this especial one it outrivalled even its well-known characteristic.

The Royal Meeting had indeed proved most disastrous; and as the plunging had been reckless, and in some cases mad, so was there a rather longer list of casualties than usual.

Not satisfied with the big stake he had won at Croxton, with which he might at

any rate have paid half his debts, Willie Eskdale, like many others when flushed with success, considered himself invincible; and after a pretty bad Epsom week, experienced such a blow at Ascot in trying to get home as in nine cases out of ten would have proved fatal even to a rich man.

The London season had nearly run its course. Some few of the votaries of Vanity Fair yet remained for Goodwood; but after that meeting London would be empty and desolate, Piccadilly a desert, and Rotten Row a resort of nurses and children, with perhaps a sprinkling of hard-working, badly-paid officials.

"I should think young Eskdale is about as nearly finished as he well can be," sarcastically remarked the Duke of Avondale, who lounged carelessly in a huge arm-chair in the bow-window of a well-known West End club, and joined in the conversation which went on around him. "I am told he had a fearful Ascot, though nobody seems to

know the exact amount. The ring gave him ten days to settle, and I am told settle he did; but how, nobody can make out. Linden does not know—he swears he did not give him one penny."

"Well, it is no affair of yours," good-naturedly replied Lord Hardcastle. "It is enough that he did settle, and I must say that though he played very high here, his account was always ready to the day. By the way, I saw him this morning driving Miss Chandos towards Piccadilly; what an extraordinary young lady that is! I am told she utterly ignores every one else, yet with him she is apparently on the best of terms. Upon my word, I really believe she is, what I never believed in before, a virtuous woman with nothing to gain by it."

"Stuff!" growled the Duke. "I don't believe a word of it. She is dreadfully conceited, and is paid much too well otherwise——"

"We all know *your* opinion of Viola

Chandos, Avondale," drily remarked Gerald Forsythe, looking listlessly out of the bow-window on the crowded street below. "But in this case your opinion does not go for much. The fact is, you dislike her because she would have nothing to say to you, and because,—excuse me for saying it,—with all your experience, she made you look like a fool. My opinion, and that of a good many others, is, that she really is what you will not give her the credit for being. At any rate, there is not a man who can say a word against her. I hear she knew Willie Eskdale when the two were children, and I believe——"

"You are welcome to believe what you like," said the Duke; "but I do not believe in what you call her virtue; it is merely assumed, and before long you will see that I am correct."

"Perhaps she and Eskdale are married?" lisped a beardless young *roué*, who had himself a great penchant for the beautiful actress, and who, having been treated with

contempt, felt considerably ruffled. "I have heard fellows say as much, at any rate," he continued, rather awkwardly, as he felt the eye of Sir Seymour Hastings upon him, and noticed with some uneasiness the expression of his face.

"Then you heard, in plain English, a falsehood," replied the angry young baronet. "And you are welcome to say so, with my compliments, to whoever told you. Really I cannot sit here and listen to such a pack of ridiculous nonsense," he went on hastily, as he saw that the Duke of Avondale was about to reply. "One might really be amongst a lot of fat old women talking scandal." With which remark, utterly regardless of the fierce looks of the indignant Duke, Sir Seymour left the room.

"An exceedingly ill-bred young man," severely muttered the Duke, when silence was restored; "remarkably so—the present generation seem to think that rudeness is wit."

Seeing, however, that nobody present seemed greatly to heed his strictures, and noticing an ill-suppressed look of amusement on Gerald Forsythe's face, he relapsed once more into his luxurious chair, and turning his back to the light, pretended to be highly interested in a somewhat old magazine.

The amount of money which Willie Eskdale had lost had, as is always the case, been greatly exaggerated. Still the amount was large, and to get it he had been obliged for the first time to have recourse to the aid of the Jews.

The tremendous rent-roll of the Estcourt and Balvenie estates, to which he was at present heir, had not been without due effect, and upon the security of an insurance on his life for the sum advanced, with a stipulation that, should he succeed to the earldom, four times the amount he had borrowed would be paid, the agreeable fraternity of robbers consented to give him

what he required at the comparatively reasonable rate of fifteen per cent.

"Not such bad business either," remarked Mr. Kite, the lender, in a subsequent conversation with one of his satellites. "If Lord Linden dies we get our money four times over, not to speak of interest. In the mean time we get fifteen per cent., and ample security for our advance upon Mr. Eskdale's life. Still, the terms are moderate — very moderate," he continued musingly. "But I did not like to frighten him at first. A couple of years more, Harding, and I will bet a trifle that I, and not Mr. Eskdale, in case Lord Linden has no children, am heir to the entire Estcourt property. Never frighten them at first, Harding; never begin by putting on the screw; it never pays. Why, I tell you," he went on excitedly, "if our friend Saul Davies had acted as I advised him, the entire Castle Denzil property would have been his; but he frightened his pigeon, Harding, he rushed him too soon, he never let him get deep enough;

and the consequence was—well, the consequence was that he is not owner, as he should be, of Denzil Castle."

"But the game is a risky one," replied the other. "I myself have lost money over it, and I cannot exactly see—"

"Probably you cannot," rather rudely interrupted the Jew; "but I can. I never make mistakes. Small amounts I have lost, and that is why I don't care to deal in them. But in large transactions I never lost, and never shall, for the very good reason that I never lend money at thirty per cent. unless the security would warrant my lending at four. Mr. Eskdale with one security could by insurance raise what I have advanced at, say seven per cent. I was thoughtful, Harding, and let him have it at fifteen; but then he has also to pay his insurance. Next time, however, money will be tighter, and more difficult to obtain, until at last, at last, Harding," he continued with a horrid grin, "the whole of his future prospects will be in my

hands—the future of Estcourt will be mine. Then of course money will be tighter still; in fact, not to be got. And then my pigeon may go the shortest way to the devil he likes."

An involuntary shudder passed over the somewhat less hardened satellite as he watched the diabolical expression upon the dirty, unshaved face of the elder man.

Callous though he was becoming, he had not as yet quite reached the level of his patron and master, and had not as yet descended to the depth of degradation which made the woes and sorrows of others a happiness and joy to himself.

Without a word he therefore busied, or seemed to busy, himself over his numerous papers, while the financier leaned back in his chair, and with closed eyes began to dream of future days, when perhaps Estcourt, the grand old home of the Percies, and latterly of the almost as mighty Eskdales, should belong to himself and his heirs. He would, he thought, alter the name of Kite; that name, though

good enough for his present state, would hardly befit the owner of Estcourt. Meditating thus, and soothed by the soft scratching of his busy clerk's pen upon various sheets of paper, the great financier, who held under his thraldom more men of ancient names than any despotic tyrant of old, fell asleep, much to the annoyance of his clerk, who found considerable difficulty in adding up his complicated accounts to the music of his patron's tremendous snores.

* * * * *

In a man's greatest sufferings and troubles no such true friends can he find as in women. In his days of prosperity and power women will flatter and fawn on him; but when the dark day of adversity arrives, when all the future seems black and hopeless, then he discovers woman's real merit.

When we say woman, we mean one who is true, honest, and unselfish. For the giddy, frivolous butterflies who, save when there is aught to be gained, care nothing for man's

friendship, we entertain no feeling save a certain pitying contempt. A real woman to our mind is not one who in our prosperity clings to and follows us, but one who, when we are in trouble, and when misery and misfortune arise, comes and with soft winning ways withdraws our thoughts from the dreary prospect, and cheers us to face the future bravely.

And such a woman was Viola Chandos.

In the first bright, happy days of Willie Eskdale's manhood she had entertained a certain liking for him, which, gradually and almost unknown to herself, had grown into a stronger passion. Loving him as too late she found that she did, yet Viola never for a moment swerved from her fixed resolution of refusing to be aught else than a friend to him.

For the last four months—indeed, ever since the accident at Richmond—the girl had been almost cold towards her old companion. As often as possible she had declined to drive with him, and when he came to her house had

on some excuse or another been very busy, and unable to spare him much of her time.

When, however, the tidings reached her that her old playmate was in a serious scrape —in fact, as the world charitably put it, "utterly done for" — Viola's whole manner underwent the greatest change. Whenever he chose to come to see her she tried her best to distract and amuse him, and spent hours of her valuable time in dispelling his moody reflections, and aiding his plans for the future.

"The world may say what it chooses," she observed, when told how her kindness was twisted into a different meaning. "The world is nothing to me, except that I help to amuse it. I have no one to answer to save myself; and my own conscience being clear, how should I care for what people, whom in reality I despise, say or think about me?"

It was after four o'clock on a really bright afternoon, such as in London is rarely seen, that Willie Eskdale, tired to death of the gay throng which filled Rotten Row, and still

more wearied of the endless impertinent questions as to how he was getting on from men who, if he had been "Linden," would have fawned upon him, sought the pretty little house in Park Lane, where he knew he was welcome to take shelter from all his troubles and bothers.

The bright little drawing-room, filled with flowers and beautiful china, seemed to him, sad and weary as he was, as some haven into which no cares or worries could ever enter; and here he knew also, that, come what might, or let the wheel of Fortune take her worst turn, he was sure of that which man craves most for, be he rich or poor, great or small—sympathy.

"Well, Willie, you look gloomy enough—what is the matter now?" began Viola, kindly, as the young Guardsman entered her pretty drawing-room. "I got your note this morning; I am so glad you have been able to arrange everything. What fresh trouble is there now?"

"None fresh, Viola," was the moody answer, as Willie threw himself with a sigh into a huge arm-chair. "But there is nothing to be very joyful over either. What with insurances and interest to the Jews, I am left with barely four hundred a year! What I was thinking about was, whether it would not be the better plan to sell my entire interest. I could get a very good sum for it—indeed, I don't see what else I can do. I cannot live in the Guards on what I have left. Linden is certain to marry. I really think it is the best thing I could do."

"Don't talk nonsense, Willie," laughed Viola, leaving her writing-table with its heap of papers and joining her companion, who was idly staring into the fire. "You know nothing is further from your intention. You would be mad to do such a thing, at any rate for a year or two, until you see what is going to happen. Fancy selling your reversion to Estcourt and Balvenie for not even one year's rent-roll! No, Willie, you must not do that.

Take my advice: have another talk with Lord Linden, and explain your position to him; he will help you in the end; he is not really unkind, but you continually keep roughing him up the wrong way. Yes, smoke a cigarette if you like," she continued, as she noticed her companion toying idly with his case, "and then read this letter that I have had from Paris. Monsieur Grenot offers me forty thousand francs to take the part of Beatrice in Shakespeare's play; it would only be for six weeks, as you will see he explains; and as our theatre will close for two months now, I think I shall accept his proposal."

"Yes, I should accept it, Viola," replied Willie Eskdale more cheerfully, reading the letter and returning it to his companion. "Sixteen hundred pounds is not a bad offer even from Grenot, and the part of Beatrice will suit you admirably. However, he will not have the worst of the bargain either," he added, glancing affectionately at the lovely form before him. "No man knows better than

Grenot that you will fill his theatre every night—and I suppose he will double his prices if you are acting."

"I will accept on the condition that he does not give Eccelin the chief part," laughed the girl, returning to her writing-table. "I really *will* not act with him, he spoils the entire piece. In fact, I could not act Beatrice with him—certainly not as I should like to."

"Grenot hates Eccelin more than you do, Viola," grimly returned Eskdale. "But the Parisians like him. However, I should think he would certainly allow you to choose. May I dine here to-night?" he continued, dubiously—"I feel that I want to be quiet."

"Yes, of course, Willie," replied Viola, playing absently with her pen. "Seven o'clock, I cannot dine later. And now if you have nothing better to do you can drive me to that florist's behind Cromwell Gardens."

CHAPTER XII.

Goodwood was over, and with the ducal meeting died the London season. Society scattered in every direction: some to their own country seats; others, who had spent nearly the whole of their available income in vainly trying to keep pace with their richer brethren, to exist in some cheap and secluded watering-place, there to ponder over the vanity and foolishness of their career, and nevertheless to starve and make themselves generally miserable in order to be able to resume their folly in another London season, to undergo another social penance for the sake of what they falsely imagined to be keeping up their position, and giving their

daughters still another chance of securing eligible husbands—the crowning ambition of their senseless and useless existence. The country squire, with his income of perhaps three thousand per annum, and a large family, generally consisting of daughters, if he once gives way to the wishes of the feminine members of his family, and does a London season, almost invariably lives in a state of discomfort during the winter months. What would be ample to provide him and his children a comfortable easy life at home, dwindles after a London season to actual poverty. Hunt he cannot, nor can he shoot, not being able to live at his own place; and it is seldom indeed that a man is found bold enough to invite a whole family to his battues.

And after all, what has been gained? A hot and decidedly uncomfortable small London house in exchange for his own roomy one, a succession of endless dinners, balls, and garden-parties, resulting generally in nothing achieved. Daughters still unmarried, purse

nearly exhausted, and temper, unless the head of the family be a modern saint, completely so.

A London ball-room is a place where a keen investigator into the human character may profitably spend an hour or two. And if after one season he has not gathered material enough from his observations to fill five volumes, he must be dense indeed.

The fawning, servile flattery to the great is hardly so striking as the universal rush after any one who is known to be wealthy. The vices of a rich man are regarded as simple exuberance of spirits; while nothing more is required of a rich woman, if she have any pretence to good looks. Truly, in London society the god of wealth reigns supreme.

Amongst the wealthiest of the many wealthy votaries of Vanity Fair was Richard Graham, a respectable, easy-going elderly gentleman, whose vast accumulation of money in sundry successful speculations had given him the right to become one of the leaders of society had he felt inclined.

Such a position, however, was very far indeed from his inclination, and had it not been for his wife, an ambitious and rather pushing individual, he would have been well content to have gone on quietly as he had begun, accumulating money, and letting the rest of the world alone.

But in this he was not seconded by Mrs. Graham, whose ideas ran rather in the direction of spending than hoarding; and pushed on vigorously by his better half, Richard Graham at length found himself launched into that world of fashion and gaiety which he would gladly have avoided.

The princely entertainments which his house in Grosvenor Square afforded soon made him popular. So long as he was not called upon to entertain his guests himself, Mr. Graham felt nothing but pleasure in seeing others enjoy themselves, and as his wife took the entire management of their entertainments into her own hands, he

felt sincerely glad that his wealth should be the means of affording general gratification.

Mabel Graham, the heiress to her father's vast wealth, was, on her presentation to the world, of course an object of much curiosity and admiration. And to do the girl justice, her pretty face and pleasing manners would have made her popular even had she been minus her brilliant prospects. Her head had by no means been turned by the deference accorded her; and more than once, to her mother's evident chagrin, she had declined a really brilliant marriage.

"Richard," began Mrs. Graham on a hot July afternoon, as her husband strolled idly into the drawing-room, where five o'clock tea was going on, "I heard from Lord Linden this morning, and he reminds me of a half-promise I made him at Ascot to pay him a visit at Estcourt. I have written to say that we shall be happy to go. He has excellent grouse-shooting, which will

suit you. Of course you have no other engagement?"

"No, my dear, none," mildly replied the great speculator who, though on the Exchange, and in negotiating huge loans for foreign states, considered the most determined and headstrong of men, yet before his wife seemed always the most timorous and brow-beaten,—"none, my dear; and Estcourt is a place I should much like to see. I have heard a great deal of its beauties. What a pity there is no such place in the market; I should certainly buy it. Mabel," he continued, more freely, turning towards his daughter, "who was that young man who came up and talked to you in the Row? I liked his appearance so very much, and he seemed to know me, though I confess I could not recollect his name."

"Father, you really are too silly sometimes!" laughed the girl, as a rosy flush spread over her pretty open face. "Why, surely you remember Mr. Eskdale? He is

Lord Linden's brother, and you met him at Melton two or three times."

"Of course—how stupid of me! But I never can put a name to a face I know well," went on Mr. Graham, setting down his empty cup. "I remember him now perfectly. He comes to dinner to-night, does he not?"

"Yes, and so do Sir Seymour Hastings, and two or three others," quickly replied Mrs. Graham. "And now, Richard, I am going out for a drive; the evening is the only cool time now. Mabel is coming with me, so you must amuse yourself over your perpetual price lists, or anything else you like, until we return."

"I wanted Mabel to come with me to the Academy and see the picture I have just bought," replied Mr. Graham, in a rather disappointed tone. "Won't you come, Mabel?"

"Yes, father, of course I will if you want me," replied the girl affectionately, standing on tip-toe, and pressing her soft scarlet

lips upon the somewhat care-worn face before her. "I was only going with mother to see a set of pearls at Hancock's; but I really care nothing about jewellery, and would far rather see your new picture."

"You really are incomprehensible, Mabel!" somewhat angrily returned Mrs. Graham. "You talk about this famous set of pearls, unique I suppose of their kind in Europe, and which I have decided upon buying, as if they were nothing but beads! But go with your father by all means. I believe you care more for those odious oil-paintings than you would for the crown diamonds of France."

"That I certainly do, mother!" laughed Mabel, as she caught her father's eye resting fondly and somewhat anxiously upon her. "Pictures speak to me, diamonds do not."

"The picture is one of the best that Millais ever painted, to my mind," broke in Mr. Graham eagerly. "I bought it because I recognize something in it—I can't quite make

out what, but still something—very like what you were as a child, Mabel."

"You may buy all the pictures in the Academy for what I care, Richard," petulantly returned his wife. "But if it is Millais' new picture you have bought, I am glad of it. The Duchess of Avondale," she continued, rather proudly, "was speaking of it, and wishing that the Duke would buy it; which, however, he said he could not afford to do."

"I bought it because it reminded me of Mabel," simply repeated Mr. Graham, turning to leave the room. "Mabel, my child, shall we drive in your victoria, or shall I be too heavy for it?"

"Too heavy! no, of course not," gleefully replied the girl, as she moved towards the bell. "I will order it at once. I shall be ready in a quarter of an hour."

* * * * * *

It was past twelve o'clock, and the dark blue, star-studded sky, flashing like glittering gems, and the bright, silvery moon, made night

almost as bright as day. The huge, massive grey walls and endless castellated turrets of Estcourt were bathed in the pale, weird, silvery light. The stately keep, towering dark and gloomy above the surrounding woods, with its massive and lofty flag-tower, seemed like some tremendous stronghold which a giant's hand had placed as an impenetrable barrier in front of the surrounding hills.

Far below, and stretching for miles in extent, lay the Estcourt woods—oaks, huge beeches, and stately firs. Weird, cold, but majestically grand, they lay quiet and motionless, like some ancient and unknown forest of bygone times. Half across the home park, and stretching away towards the dark, frowning mountains, lay the lake, placid and calm, not a breath of wind disturbing its pale, motionless waters. Under giant oaks, whose broad, stretching arms formed a canopy of dark green, amidst the tall, delicate ferns, lay or stood groups of deer, their antlered heads looking weird in the extreme. The

night was quiet, without a cloud in the dark blue heavens; a slight mist rising from the dewy grass, and looking like a thread of glittering gauze, alone broke the view over the far-stretching, bracken-covered park.

"It certainly is a lovely place," muttered Willie Eskdale to himself, as he stood on the rocky terrace which ran level with the drawing-room windows, and gazed on the lovely scene lying far below his feet; "very lovely. Viola was right: even if I wished to do it, I have no right to allow this place to go to the family of Kite. Yes, Viola was right: come what may, I will never sell my reversion of Estcourt."

"I wish, Willie, when you have done dreaming on the terrace, that you would come in and shut the window," called out Lord Linden, who, comfortably seated before a blazing fire, and surrounded by a circle of chosen friends in the smoking-room which opened to the terrace, drew his arm-chair closer to the cheerful blaze, and looked

reproachfully at the open window. "What pleasure can you take in catching cold, and making others uncomfortable?"

"I was looking at the view, Ronald," replied his brother, as he obediently entered, and pulled the heavy folding windows together after him. "The night is one of the most lovely I have ever seen; come and look at it."

"Not I," laughingly returned the Earl. "The moon, to my mind, is at best a mournful, dreary spectacle. I hate anything which is not warm and cheerful."

"The moon," began Count Hesleff, an Austrian friend whom Lord Linden had picked up upon his travels, "is not cold or mournful to me, Ronald. On the contrary, my friend, she inspires us with many sublime ideas, which, though perhaps not tolerated in the present day, will assuredly be hailed by future generations. It was by moonlight, Linden, on the Rhine, that I conceived and wrote my pamphlet on 'The Future State.' The moon, I assure you——"

"Has much to answer for," gaily broke in Willie Eskdale. "Was it not Byron who said so? Mr. Graham," he continued, turning towards that gentleman, "let me open that bottle of soda water for you. Miss Graham is eager to see my favourite Twilight do her gallop in the morning, and I promised to take her. The training ground is only a mile from here; will you come also?"

"Well, no, Eskdale, I think not," answered Mr. Graham, smiling. "I do not care much for early hours, and I really understand nothing about horses. But Mabel is very fond of them; she will, I have no doubt, enjoy her visit to the ground greatly."

"That Twilight is a real good mare, I believe," joined in George Halliday, mixing a brandy and soda. "I saw her do a gallop two mornings ago; she certainly was not extended, though she was accompanied by King Alfred, and Honi Soit; the mare had decidedly the best of it, and a better mover I never saw. We all know she can jump;

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rupted Willie Eskdale, who,
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manage to be there with the
Lord Linden. "I shall drive
ere are lots of horses for those
ride. You ride with Miss
u not, Willie?" he continued.
Mr. Gr with

abruptly answered his brother. "Good night, everybody. It is past one o'clock, and I have to be up by about six. Arnold," he added with a laugh, "would not consent to Twilight's doing a canter a minute later than seven, even for me."

"I had no idea it was so late," said Mr. Graham, as he also rose to leave the room. "You will take care of Mabel to-morrow morning?" he continued, lighting a candle and joining Willie Eskdale in the huge entrance hall, whence they walked up-stairs together. "Your horses here are not very quiet, I know, but perhaps you have got a steady hack for her."

"Oh yes, Mr. Graham," replied Willie, halting on the first flat, and preparing to turn off to his room, "your daughter shall ride Violet's London hack, the one she rides in the Row; he is as quiet as an old sheep. That is your dressing-room, the last door but one; good night."

At half-past six o'clock punctually, Eskdale, descending to the dining-room, found his

companion for the morning ride already waiting for him.

And a very pretty picture the girl made, dressed in her well-fitting habit, with her sunny hair neatly coiled up under her hat, as she sat at the top of the great table and superintended a massive hissing silver urn, which with a small but well-prepared breakfast was in readiness.

"I can't eat much at this hour, I never can," began Willie Eskdale, drawing a chair to the table after having said good-morning. "Yes, I will have a cup of tea," he added, in answer to his companion's question. "It is very kind of you to take such an interest in Twilight, Miss Graham; it is very early to ask you to get up."

"Not at all," replied the girl, as a smile passed over her pretty face. "I am so anxious to see Twilight again; I saw her win at Croxton, you know, and Mr. Halliday told me only yesterday that, in his opinion, she is one of the best steeple-chasers he ever saw, or rather would be."

"And that is very kind of George," laughed the owner, as he helped himself to fish, "and very flattering to Twilight, seeing that she has never even run in a steeple-chase at present. But if you have finished breakfast, Miss Graham," he continued, "we will make a start; the horses are at the door, and we have a mile to gallop over the park. What a glorious morning! Don't those ferns look lovely covered with dew?"

"Beautiful!" returned the girl, standing on the top step of the entrance, and looking over the far-stretching park, glittering in the rays of the morning sun like a sheet of silver. "Oh, do look at those thousands of rabbits running and playing about! What a lovely place Estcourt is."

"Yes, it is a nice old place," quietly answered Eskdale, swinging his companion lightly into her saddle, and mounting his own racing-looking hack. "Be here at eight, Fulmer," he went on, turning to the groom. "Come, Miss Graham, this way."

"Why does not one always get up at this hour?" said Miss Graham, when, after galloping half a mile across the park, they pulled their horses into a walk and turned into a deep recess of one of the many lovely glades. "I never thought a morning could be so beautiful! Look, Mr. Eskdale, at the sun breaking through those old oaks. And the lake looks as if it were on fire."

"Yes, a morning ride at Estcourt at this time of year is better than sleeping in bed," replied Willie, looking half-admiringly, half-wonderingly into his companion's pretty flushed face. "But if you like it so much, why not ride every morning? I should like to show you the Great Mere in the early light. Suppose we go to-morrow."

"There is nothing I should like better," frankly returned the girl. "That is," she added hesitatingly, "if it will not bore you."

"Bore me? what an idea!" laughed Eskdale; "I should like it of all things. I think the Great Mere is one of the loveliest

things I have ever seen; it used to be my favourite haunt as a boy," and at the thought of how Viola and he had wandered and played there as children, a regretful look passed over his hitherto cheerful countenance. "But see, there is the edge of the racecourse, and there is Arnold with quite a string of horses," he went on with a rather forced laugh. "I hope, Miss Graham, you will not split upon our stable secrets?"

"Twilight will only canter a gentle canter for a couple of miles, sir," said Arnold, the well-known trainer of the Estcourt stables. "I don't want to put her into anything like severe work before another six weeks. She is a good mare if ever I trained one, and I don't mean to have her knocked about; she will win the first big steeplechase you wish her to, but there is plenty of time yet."

"What a beautiful animal!" exclaimed Miss Graham, when Arnold and Eskdale join-
'r after a short talk, and the sheets were

stripped simultaneously from the backs of seven three-year-olds which, led by old King Alfred, were to do a spin at three-quarter speed of one mile.

"Which?" laughingly asked Willie Eskdale. "There are eight of them, counting King Alfred. Which do you admire most, Miss Graham?"

"That one," somewhat hesitatingly replied the girl, as she pointed with her whip towards a great slashing chestnut colt, his coat shining like a sheet of burnished gold, and a white star upon his forehead.

"Daydream—by Scottish Chief: not a bad guess, Miss Graham," quietly answered her companion. "He is a good colt, second for the Two Thousand Guineas. He went amiss, and did not run for the Derby, but we think perhaps he may take the Leger. That black colt is a good one too," he continued, pointing towards a low, level, sleepy-looking animal. "Nubian Guard, Linden calls him; he won the Criterion, and has never run since. There

they go, but only one mile, Arnold says, so we shall not see them pass us. Come and see Twilight do her two mile canter."

"Yes, she does look well, Mr. Eskdale," answered the trainer, as upon her clothing being swept off, the bonny chestnut mare elicited an exclamation of approval from her owner. "Doyle will give her just a healthy canter. No, sir," he continued, rather sternly, as Willie Eskdale petitioned to be allowed to ride her himself. "No, Mr. Eskdale, I really can't allow it; the mare is very fresh, and you would let her gallop. When she comes to the post ride her if you choose, but until then, if I am answerable, I cannot allow it."

"Perhaps you are right, Arnold," laughed Twilight's owner, as he watched the mare at an easy canter swing with her light jockey round the bend. "Look, Miss Graham, how she steals along! Is it not like a piece of clockwork?"

"I hope you will enter the mare for a

good race, Mr. Eskdale," went on the great trainer, as he critically watched the now fast disappearing mare. "She is a good one, good enough to win a moderate flat race; and if she has a good jockey up I shall back her myself."

"Good enough to enter for a big steeple-chase, and to stand to win a lot of money?" half-sceptically asked the owner, as, upon the completion of her gallop, Twilight pulling up fresh and full of go, he proudly stroked the damp, soiled neck of his favourite. "Good enough for that, do you think, Arnold?"

"Yes," laconically replied the trainer, after giving the order to turn the mare's head for home. "Yes, Mr. Eskdale, if fit when she comes to the post, good enough to back at reasonable odds to win the Grand National."

"Then so be it," muttered Willie Eskdale: "upon Twilight I will stand to get out of my infernal scrapes, and if she fails—why, I fail utterly."

"How silent and thoughtful you have

become, Mr. Eskdale!" brightly exclaimed Miss Graham, as after cantering across the racecourse, they once more entered the shady depths of a forest glade which led towards the castle. "What has happened? Has not Twilight pleased you?"

"Pleased me?—yes," slowly replied Willie, rousing himself with an effort from his reverie. "I beg your pardon for being so stupid, but I was thinking."

"Thinking of what?" went on the girl, as she playfully pulled at a green bough of an oak under which they were passing. "A penny for your thoughts."

"I was thinking," answered her companion, stroking the neck of his impatient hack, "whether a horse might not be the best or worst friend a man could ever have. And yet I was wrong to even entertain a doubt. A horse will do what he can, he has a generous nature. I certainly would rather trust my future to Twilight, to make or to mar, than to any friend I possess."

"I think you are wrong, Mr. Eskdale," replied Miss Graham somewhat gravely, a sad expression clouding her hitherto bright face. "I do not of course know what friends you allude to, but if they are only friends in prosperity, I should not count them friends at all. Friendship is a sacred word, and means more than is generally understood. Ask yourself, do you know nobody for whom you would not freely give half of what you have or ever will have?"

"It would not be much to say I would give half what I at present have," lightly returned Willie Eskdale, determined to change the conversation. "What I may have is different; one, or perhaps two people there are for whom I would do *anything*. But there the number ends."

"I don't believe you," laughed the girl, putting her horse into a canter, and following her companion across the open park. "But here we are almost home. You have no idea how I have enjoyed this

early ride, I do not think I ever had a prettier one."

"I am delighted that you have not been bored," slowly replied Willie, pulling his hack into a walk as they approached the broad drive. "I know you will enjoy the ride to Ainsworth, it is a lovely old place. And you have promised," he added, rather eagerly, "to come with me some other morning to the Great Mere. I should like to show it to you."

"I shall be very happy," answered Miss Graham simply—"that is, if I shall *really* not be in your way. But I thought you went every morning to see the horses gallop?"

"Not every morning, and if I did I should be only too glad to give up one for the pleasure of your company," replied Eskdale. "And the mere on an August morning is a sight well worth your getting up early to see. Hesleff, who pretends that nothing is equal to Hungary, was obliged to admit he had never seen anything to beat it."

CHAPTER XIII.

A SMALL, unpretentious-looking house, situated not very far from the Rue St. Honoré, was well known to habitués of Paris as the best as well as the most select gambling club in that city.

To be a member of the famous Club du Nord was sufficient to stamp a man as one well known in society, and possessed of unimpeachable reputation. No professional gamblers, half sharpers, half gentlemen, had ever been known to cross the portals. It stood, as it professed to stand, high among the first clubs of European cities.

At the time of which we speak—namely before the fall of the Empire—the Club du

Nord was in the zenith of its fame. During the days of the Commune the house was partially destroyed, and though subsequently repaired, it never regained its former grandeur.

Play in this select temple of fortune was carried on to an extent almost unknown, even at great public *salons*. There is a story that one Vicomte de Chateaufleury, of the Imperial Guard, afterwards killed in a sortie from Metz, had given no less than five hundred thousand francs for the bank at baccarrat. And tradition adds, that after a run of heavy ill-luck, the young Vicomte carried all before him, winning from Garry Owen alone more than four hundred thousand francs, and reducing the not over-wealthy Count of Hainault to almost complete beggary.

Stories there were by scores of the enormous amounts of money which almost nightly changed hands; and, as is generally the case, these sums, large as they were in reality, grew no less in being repeated.

Large, however,—in some cases even im-

mense,—as were the sums lost or won, it was a proud boast of the members of this select "hell," that in no single instance had an account ever been not forthcoming.

It was after twelve o'clock at night, and the theatres and opera being closed, the Club rapidly began to fill. Some made their way immediately to the card-rooms, while others, thinking that there was plenty of time before them to win or lose a fortune, settled themselves comfortably in arm-chairs, and lighting cigarettes, chatted amiably, if not, perhaps, quite charitably, about the various topics of the day.

"I saw you at the theatre to-night, Count," began a fair-haired, rosy-cheeked youngster, called Louis D'Auprêt, a most inveterate gambler, under which passion even his large fortune bade fair to give way. "Tell me," he continued, addressing the Count, one of the best soldiers France boasted—and a gray-haired, grisly-looking warrior enough—"tell me, Count, what did you think of this Miss

Chandos, over whom Paris has certainly gone mad? I thought her one of the most charming women I have ever seen, and of her acting there seems to be but one opinion."

"I know more of moving armies than I do of women's attractions," bluntly replied the great soldier, while he quietly stirred his cup of coffee. "You, D'Auprêt," he went on, with a grim smile, "should know better than I do. They tell me, and I believe it, that she is invulnerable—as invulnerable as the fortress of Metz. And yet I never knew a fortress which could not be taken either by a *coup de main*, or by patience. Say, D'Auprêt, that I was in a hurry to take a great fortress, and had the means at my disposal. My first effort, if I could find a weak spot, would be to take it by storm; and if I found I was mistaken, and got repulsed with heavy loss, then I should sit patiently down before it, and by time and starvation—perhaps aided by bribes—do what I could not achieve by force. Fortresses and women are much alike, in my opinion."

"But look at the time that Troy held out," laughingly replied the young *roué*, as he threw himself back in his arm-chair. "Your argument does not hold good, Count. Neither woman nor fortress would be worth such a prolonged siege."

"Then, if the woman or fortress was not worth the trouble, I should concern myself about neither," replied the veteran, with a low laugh. "But why all these questions, D'Auprêt? Have you fallen in love with this Miss Chandos?"

"She is lovely," briefly returned the other, without further answering the Count's question. "What say you, Owen?" he continued, turning towards that famous individual, who, with a huge brandy and soda before him, was meditating whether he should go to the card-room or retire home to—what he much needed—his bed.

"I say this," testily replied Garry Owen, some feeling which he could not exactly define prompting him to grow extremely angry. He

had been that evening to the theatre to see this new actress about whom all Paris was raving, and had experienced a strange, and to him perfectly new, sensation upon first beholding her. Dreamily sitting in his stall, he had watched her every movement. Each action, each gesture carried him away from the present into a time long past. He *must* be growing old, he half-angrily admitted to himself, to allow such follies to influence him; but still, the more he strove to rouse himself, the more he found his thoughts returning to bygone days—days which, it now began to dawn upon him, had been sadly wasted. To dispel these new sensations he drank somewhat heavily, and was now in no mood for idle banter. The subject young D'Auprêt hit upon was, he could not have told why, a very sore one, and hence his anger.

"I say this," he continued, somewhat savagely, "that, from what I have seen, and from what I have been told, you would most probably get, if you approached Viola Chandos,

what would do you a great deal of good—and that is a d—d snubbing. Miss Chandos, who has had the greatest in England vainly contending for her favour, is not likely to be influenced by a beardless, brainless Frenchman."

A dead silence followed this certainly rude and hasty speech. Brave as a lion, the French Count looked anxiously towards his young companion, as if in doubt as to how he would act. Then, as he saw the deadly paleness which overspread his face, a somewhat contemptuous smile crossed his own countenance, and turning sharply on his heel, he asked somewhat sternly,—"Mr. Owen, do you apply those remarks to *all* Frenchmen, or to Monsieur D'Auprêt individually?"

"My remarks applied to Monsieur D'Auprêt alone," grimly returned the famous duellist, looking boldly into the Count's face, "and he may take them as he chooses. I repeat again, that it is ridiculous for a scented, perfumed puppy to give himself such airs, pretending

that no woman can resist him. *Peste!* it sickens me."

"His age protects him!" furiously exclaimed the indignant dandy, as, pale with fear and anger, he rose from his chair and addressed the Count. "Had it been otherwise he should have answered for this."

"My age?" laughed Garry Owen — a hoarse, vindictive laugh, which made the young Frenchman's blood run cold, "my age! Old as I may be, young man, let me inform you that I am perfectly capable of taking care of myself. Pray let no idea of my age prevent your calling me to account. Ah!" he continued, as Monsieur D'Auprêt stalked out of the room,—"ah, Count, when you and I were the age of that gilded puppy, I don't think we should have walked away with the white flag flying!"

"Coward!" muttered the veteran, as he gazed in utter amazement after the retreating form of his young countryman. "But his mother was a Belgian," he went on, in a more

satisfied tone, as he turned to address Garry Owen, "and his father, at the best, was but a wretched mechanic, who made money by robbing soldiers of France. And to say truth, Owen," he added lightly, "it was a sharp test to ask a gilded butterfly like D'Auprêt to meet the best swordsman in France, though, like myself, I dare swear you are not so active or so quick in your passes as you were twenty years ago."

"Twenty years ago!" muttered Garry Owen, sadly. "Ah, things were different then. Somehow I don't feel myself to-night—I shall go home. I am glad I telegraphed for Hardgrip; he will cheer me up, and perhaps I may return to Ireland for a short time. I must be growing old and shaky, or else why should I keep thinking of past days—long, long past. It certainly is astonishing," he continued dreamily, as the Count left the room, and he found himself in total solitude, "what an impression that Miss Chandos has made upon me. I never saw a face which inter-

ested me so much,—and God knows that nothing now, save high play, or having a desperate duel on my hands, moves me to the smallest interest."

The ceaseless hum of many voices in the adjoining apartment, and the monotonous call of the croupiers, as with their rakes they pulled towards them the amounts won by the bank, and loudly proclaimed the game, struck harshly for once upon Garry Owen's ear. And it was with a feeling of genuine regret for his ill-spent life that he turned to leave what seemed for the first time in his eyes a *hell*—a hell, too, with which he was disgusted.

Crossing the entrance hall, and putting on his great-coat, he was preparing to leave the club, to return to what he called his home, —though to his now changed feelings the name would have sounded ill-deserved,—when with a polite bow, and an expression of regret for troubling him, Charles Count Duval, one of the most brilliant Frenchmen of the day,

interposed his somewhat burly proportions between Owen and the door.

"Pardon me, Mr. Owen," began the famous duellist, with another low bow, "I am indeed sorry to intrude upon you; but when I state that my errand is from Monsieur D'Auprêt, you will, I am sure, allow me a few minutes in which to—"

"So the young cub means to fight, does he?" laughed Garry Owen, as a savage flash lit up his dark and still handsome eyes. "Gad, I am glad of it! And I owe him an apology for my thoughts of him, which were not of a very exalted nature. Well, Duval, what is it you propose? I suppose Monsieur D'Auprêt would hardly care to meet me with rapiers, but I shall not insist—"

"Your pardon, Monsieur," gravely interposed the polite Frenchman, moving away from the door. "But these are questions which I decline to discuss with *you*. All such affairs I shall have the honour of arranging with your second. I can, however, inform

you," he added still more gravely, "that it is the intention of Monsieur D'Auprêt to meet you with your own special weapon. In Merrignac's opinion, my principal is one of the most rising fencers in Paris."

"I'm glad of it," laughed the reckless Irishman as he turned away; "so much the better. I will send my second to your hotel early to-morrow morning. Good night, Monsieur."

But as Garry Owen left the club a half-sigh escaped him.

"The devil *must* be in me," he muttered angrily, as the keen night air fanned his heated temples and throbbing head. "What should I wish to quarrel with this boy for? I'm old enough to be his father, and I certainly had no right to speak to him as I did. However, that is past, and I cannot recall my words. But I'll take good care the young butterfly comes to no harm. Merrignac's best pupil, is he?" he continued with a grim smile. "Well, I will show Monsieur

Merrignac that his pupils have still much to learn."

* * * * *

"Count Duval has placed his garden at our disposal, Mr. Owen," explained Monsieur Latour, the chosen second of Garry Owen, entering his principal's room about six o'clock, and with some considerable difficulty awaking him from a somewhat heavy sleep. "What will you have for breakfast, Owen?" he continued, hesitatingly. "It is no use for me to dictate to *you* in affairs of this sort, but don't drink brandy, *mon ami*."

"A brandy-and-soda, stiff, and a couple of poached eggs, are all I want, Latour," sleepily returned Garry Owen, turning somewhat uneasily upon his bed. "An ice-cold bath first, however, and then I will accompany you. I hope," he continued impatiently, "that D'Auprêt will not rush at and force me. I wish him no harm, and would apologize if I could,—but that, of course, as I am English, cannot be. These Frenchmen

would put it down to cowardice, or old age, or some other absurdity. Latour, I tell you plainly," he went on with excitement, "that I know myself to be in the wrong, but I will not give way. D'Auprêt shall come to no harm; but from me, who have proved myself a good swordsman, tell our adversary's second that I will fence scientifically or not at all. I don't want to murder the boy."

"From what I have heard and seen," laughed Latour, "I must say, Owen, that you take things easily. D'Auprêt is considered a really good fencer, and is in first-rate condition. Your headlong assaults will have no effect on him. Come, *mon ami*, here is your breakfast. We have but an hour, and I should not like to be last upon the ground."

"This will be the eighteenth duel I have fought," replied Owen, as he somewhat reluctantly rose, "and I have never yet been worsted by sword or pistol. I tell you, Latour, that if I chose I could kill this boy in half-a-dozen passes. When we arrive upon

the ground you will acknowledge as much. Five years ago Merrignac himself would have thought twice about facing me at the end of a pointed rapier; and you will agree with me, that none of his pupils have ever arrived at his excellence."

"Perhaps not," drily replied the Count. "But five years ago is not to-day, Owen. You had better not hold your adversary too cheap; good swordsman though you are, you may find that youth too active for you now."

"We shall see," grimly replied the other, after finishing his toilet, taking down a somewhat old-fashioned rapier from the wall, and critically trying its strength by bending it in a hoop upon the ground—"we shall see. Take that rapier in this case, and if you are ready I am. I won't eat those eggs," he continued, rather fiercely. "Hammers, bring me another brandy-and-soda—and then, Latour, we will start."

"You will be blown in the first rally," angrily exclaimed the Count, as he watched

his friend drain his second glass. "But if you *will* play the fool you must; it is not for me to dictate to one who *was* the best swordsman in Europe."

"I'm only sorry it is not Merrignac himself," carelessly replied the Irishman, pulling his cloak well round him, and settling himself in his friend's brougham. "I feel ten years younger now that I know I am soon to be in front of a bit of quivering blue steel. Gad, there is nothing like it! But I won't hurt D'Auprêt, all the same."

"Take care he don't hurt you," replied his second. "He has one very awkward attack,—a disengage,—and——"

"Stuff!" contemptuously exclaimed Owen. "Wait and see. I'll give Merrignac's best pupil a bit of work which even his master would find hard to beat. Give me a cigarette; I always like to smoke when I go upon the ground. It won't shake *me*, but it will demoralize *him*."

Arriving at Charles Duval's house, the two

were instantly admitted by the Count himself, who, after having courteously offered refreshment, which, however, was at once negatived by Garry Owen's second, proceeded to escort his early visitors through a long low drawing-room, which opened upon a conservatory, made beautiful and sweet from its large number of rare, and in some cases almost priceless, exotics.

Leaving the conservatory, in which lovely spot Garry Owen evinced a strong desire to linger, the three entered the garden, surrounded by high walls, and running half the length of the street behind the Count's luxurious abode. At the lower end lay a sheet of artificial water, behind which was a miniature arbour; and outside, pacing slowly up and down, and apparently buried in thought, was Monsieur D'Auprêt—his determined and generally austere look giving him a decidedly more vicious air than Garry Owen had ever before noticed on what he was accustomed to consider his rival's somewhat boyish countenance.

As the three approached the arbour, D'Auprêt halted abruptly in his stride, and recognizing his antagonist at a glance, bowed low.

"I suppose your principal will not apologize, though, in my opinion, he is gravely in error?" inquired Count Duval, as he drew Monsieur Latour upon one side. "The quarrel is an absurd one; and really, though perhaps in saying so I lay myself open to take my principal's place, I must say Mr. Owen's insult was uncalled for."

"*Mon Dieu, oui!*" briefly replied the other, with an expressive shrug of his shoulders, glancing somewhat nervously towards Garry Owen, who, with a pre-occupied air, seemed absorbed in the interesting task of digging up pebbles with his cane. "But it is idle to talk of apologies to Monsieur Owen; though he were ten times in the wrong he would never admit it. If your friend is ready, Monsieur le Comte, mine is; and it is very cold here."

"Don't hurry yourself, D'Auprêt," said

Charles Duval, himself one of the best of France's many good swordsmen, as, after stripping his friend to his silken jersey, he placed the long glittering rapier in his hand. "Remember, your antagonist is second to none; try and draw his attack; never take your eye off his, and for heaven's sake don't get excited."

Careless as though he were fencing with buttoned foils and a padded chest, Garry Owen crossed his blade, after an elaborate salute, with that of the young man opposite him. One glance at his adversary's face, determined though somewhat pale, had decided his course of action.

"'Tis a brave boy," he muttered, "and I will not harm him unless he deliberately rushes upon me. Then——"

But here Garry Owen found it necessary to postpone further reflections; as, parrying a rapid and deadly thrust, not so easily as he could have done it five years before, he found himself engaged in repelling the fiery,

though certainly somewhat rash, attack of his opponent.

Finding the ground rather uneven under his feet, the wary and practised duellist drew his adversary inch by inch from his ground, feinting and parrying, but never once, as he might have done, sending a deadly thrust home.

Rendered furious by finding his most carefully laid attack completely frustrated by the other's wonderful science, D'Auprêt now time after time exposed himself in a manner which drew exclamations of alarm from his second.

Lunging in tierce, which Garry Owen with a turn of his wrist easily avoided, the young Frenchman rapidly disengaged, and with a quick feint came out upon the inside, and pressing forward, for one moment seemed to have matters pretty much his own way. For the first time, however, Garry Owen now put forward his whole skill, and feeling somewhat blown, determined to finish the affair.

A sharp rally, in which his long, wicked blade seemed to be in every deadly point at

the same time, he now pressed upon his adversary, and after half-a-dozen quick passes, with a circular and powerful twist, forced his opponent's rapier from his hand, at the same time lowering his own point to the ground.

"Monsieur D'Auprêt, I will now tender you an ample apology for my rudeness the other evening," he began candidly, as his second hurried forward, and took into his hand his somewhat crooked weapon. "I was wrong, but I am old and irritable—will you accept that as my excuse?"

"Willingly, Monsieur!" as frankly returned the young Frenchman, taking without a sign of animosity his late adversary's outstretched hand, "willingly; and at the same time I thank you for my life. None know better than I that at least a dozen times it was in your hands."

"It is no disgrace to be defeated by Monsieur Owen," broke in Charles Duval, who now approached. "*Tête Dieu, non!* and since you are friends again, gentlemen, I hope

you will all breakfast with me; come, I will order it at once."

"Your attack upon the inside is pretty, D'Auprêt," said Garry Owen, as arm in arm they proceeded towards the house; "but it is also dangerous. If you fail you have not time to recover, and must break ground; you might try it once, but if baffled never again: ask Merrignac, and he will tell you so. But enough of this for to-day; I am really hungry—a thing I have not been for I don't know how long."

CHAPTER XIV.

"For my part, I never in my experience, which extends over more than half a century, came across a certainty," exclaimed a tall, aristocratic-looking man, as, carelessly lighting a cigarette, he gazed moodily out upon the dirty wet street below him, and surveyed with a critical air the various passers-by. "That is to say, Avondale," he went on hesitatingly, "not a certainty upon which one could really pin one's faith. If Blair Athol had been matched against a hack, that perhaps would have been a certainty, but then there would have been no betting, and consequently the certainty would have been valueless. I hear from every one that this mare of Eskdale's

is a wonder, that her trial was miraculous, that her clever trainer believes he never trained a better, that Smith is to ride, that the mare could win with another two stone, that her owner has backed her to win a fortune, that if she loses he will be a complete pauper. All this I have had dinned into my ears for the last fortnight, and my answer has been to all, as it is now to yourself, I do not believe in certainties. Fifty years, and the loss of two fortunes, have made me too wise, or too dense, as you please, and if you really want my opinion and mean to act upon it, then I say, back this Twilight for what you can well afford to lose, not for more. A man who backs horses which are not his own is little short of a lunatic."

With which concluding remark, and a long pull at a big tumbler which stood upon a table at his elbow, Sir Hawley Vivian nodded gravely at the Duke and proceeded to light another cigarette.

"I shall back her, certainly, and at once,"

replied the Duke of Avondale; "but the price is wretched—three to one, and there will be a field of over a dozen! They say the mare is clever as a cat, can't fall, and is speedy enough to win the Ascot Cup. I should think——"

"Think what you like," abruptly interrupted Sir Hawley, "but don't force yourself to believe untruths. Can't fall!" he continued, sarcastically, "what nonsense! Every horse is liable to fall; get struck into, break down, or some other infernal accident, bar which, every one afterwards declares he must have won! Probably he would, but as these accidents are always occurring, why then, I repeat, certainties are myths."

"Well, I shall go down to Tattersalls and see what is going on," replied the Duke. "My brougham, I see, is standing at the door. Can I give you a lift, Vivian?"

"I might as well go, I have nothing better to do," answered the baronet. "I should think there will be some heavy betting—there will be a lot of covering to do. Let me see, the

race is not a fortnight off. That madman, Garry Owen, has, I hear, laid ten thousand or more against the mare—what for? no mortal, certainly not he himself, knows."

"I can't say with certainty, but I believe I do know something about it," replied the Duke, as he seated himself in his brougham, "and I should say that Viola Chandos has had something to do with it. Garry Owen fought a duel about her in Paris—but you must have heard of that, all London talked of it. I believe the old madman laid against young Eskdale's mare out of sheer pique. But if Twilight is as good as she is said to be, this will be simply making a present of £10,000 to her owner. But here we are at Tattersalls. What a crowd! Really the police ought to keep the entrance clear of these roughs; I declare one might fancy oneself in the Seven Dials! Stay outside, I shall not be more than half an hour, Jervis, —and keep the horses moving."

The Subscription Rooms were crowded to

overflowing, and it was with no small difficulty that the Duke and his companion pushed their way through the mass of busy speculators into the centre of the room.

"Well, Steadman, what is the matter with the favourite Twilight?" began the Duke of Avondale, his ready ear catching the name of the mare as he halted opposite the Leviathan. "They seem to be knocking her about; what is the matter?"

"And that is more than I can tell your Grace," rapidly replied the bookmaker, casting his eye critically over his open book, and preparing to cross off one or two names. "But there seems something wrong; they are offering five to one freely, and Mr. Eskdale don't seem very keen about taking it. I saw him send a telegram off not half an hour ago; perhaps we shall know more shortly."

"So much for your certainties!" sarcastically muttered Sir Hawley Vivian, glancing somewhat searchingly into the Duke's face. "Let us ask Eskdale," he continued in a

louder voice. "If there is anything wrong he will tell us."

"I really cannot tell you anything, Avondale," replied the young owner of the favourite. "You know my opinion, and the opinion of very clever judges, about the mare. This steeplechase was a thing arranged last year at Croxton, open to any hunter in England. Bar accidents, I do not think Twilight could lose. I do not understand the way they are fielding; I have telegraphed to Estcourt to ask if anything is wrong with the mare; when I get the reply I will tell you. But if they are fielding strongly only because I will not back her, the ring may find themselves mistaken. I stand to lose three thousand now upon the race, and I would not have another penny on if they offered forties to one. Here is an answer for me," he continued, as the clerk of the rooms handed him a telegram; "I suppose it is from Arnold; if so, you are welcome to see the contents."

"Is it from Arnold?" eagerly inquired the Duke, looking on with some interest while his companion tore open and glanced over the telegram. "May I see it?"

"Certainly," courteously replied the young Guardsman, handing the open despatch to Sir Hawley Vivian with a smile. "You can both read it."

"Twilight bolted at exercise this morning after a three mile gallop, getting rid of her jockey, and slightly cutting her off fore leg above the knee; no harm done. Kindly put me on another hundred at the best price you can obtain," read the baronet in a low voice.

"That seems satisfactory enough, and if you don't intend to back her, Eskdale, I should like to put a couple of hundred on. But I will not interfere with your market."

"Let me put on this hundred for Arnold, and then you may do as you like, Vivian,' replied the other. "You will have a good run for your money, even if she don't win."

"I'll bet upon this Hunters' Steeplechase.

I'll lay six hundreds, Twilight," vociferated a long, lean man in an excited tone. "What, will no one take six hundred, about the mare? Well, seven hundreds, Twilight, once."

"You can put that down to me, Johnson," answered Willie Eskdale, opening his book and entering the bet. "You won't like that entry upon the day."

"Perhaps not, sir, perhaps not," answered the bookmaker, as he rapidly pencilled the bet. "But it is a good betting race—only twelve entries, and all of them backed. I like it better than I do some of the spring handicaps. Mr. Halliday has just backed his mare with me for a monkey, and I have laid against every other horse in the race. Here, five monkeys, Twilight," he continued in a bantering tone. "Five monkeys against the best hunter in England."

"And you can put that down to me, Johnson," broke in the Duke of Avondale. "Thank you. A nice price; feel inclined to lay it again?"

"No, thank you, your Grace," somewhat testily replied the other, "I have done with Twilight. King Arthur? Eight to one, sir," he went on, turning towards a long, thin, pale youth, who with a book massive in gold and jewelled cyphers in his hand, confronted him. "Eight to one, sir; good horse I hear, and as *you* will ride him *likely* to win."

"Put down eight hundreds," lisped the youth, totally failing to catch the other's hidden sarcasm. "He is a good horse, and, as you say, will be well ridden. I have ridden him nearly twice a week for the last month."

"Let me lay you one thousand to a hundred Fred," interposed the Duke of Avondale. "That is," he continued, laughingly, "if you *promise* to ride him yourself."

"Certainly; put it down," returned the young man in a dignified tone. "King Arthur is a better horse than is generally believed. I know myself—"

"The horse may be good enough," tartly returned the Duke; "but still, if you ride

I will lay the bet twice. Why, man, you are in no condition at all! The race is not a fortnight off, and King Arthur is supposed to be one of the hardest pullers in England. You don't know what is in store for you. A ride over four miles, a very difficult country, a pulling horse, and a biggish field of the best hunters, and certainly the best riders in England. That, I should imagine," said the Duke, as in defiance of all rules he lit a cigarette, "to be enough for a man in the best of training, while you—well, I saw you at the Racing Club at four o'clock this morning."

"I can ride as well as George Halliday," indignantly returned the other, carefully entering the Duke's bet—"quite as well. I have often seen him ride, and I cannot say I much admire his style. He is——"

"Strong as a lion, with nerves of steel; a man who drinks little and smokes less; a bad finisher, but a perfect horseman," interrupted the Duke. "No man knows better than George that if Smith, who rides the favourite,

Moore, who rides Queen of the South, or Bessborough, who rides the Flower of Athole, get alongside him for a close finish, he will be outridden. He rides his own mare for the pleasure of the thing, and has backed himself, I believe, for a monkey. In my opinion, Fred, Halliday's mare, Ivy Queen, could give King Arthur ten pounds and a beating. Come, I'll lay you three hundred to two she beats you in your places."

"Done," laconically returned the other, again producing his golden-covered, richly-cyphered book. "You won't win *that*, at all events."

"Well, I'm satisfied," returned the other, entering the bet, and strolling carelessly away. "Eskdale, are you going down towards St. James's? If so I can give you a lift in my brougham. Vivian is not coming."

"Thank you, I shall be much obliged," replied Willie. "Where are you staying for this Hunters' Race?" he continued, when they had settled themselves in the carriage. "With the Grahams?"

"Yes," answered the Duke; "Mr. Graham kindly invited me and my wife, who, however, is at Cannes. You are staying there, of course. Don't you think Miss Mabel very pretty? I do, and they tell me old Graham will give her enough money to buy a principality."

"Miss Graham is a great friend of mine," returned the young Guardsman, somewhat drily. "I think her really one of the nicest women I have ever come across; but I confess I know nothing and care less about what she has or may have, save that, if money brings happiness, I hope she may have even more than you say."

"Money is power," answered the Duke emphatically, "and power, according to my experience, is happiness. But you young fellows will never be got to understand this until it is too late. You let your youth slip by, forgetting that when you are older chances such as you now discard rarely come again. I am told," the Duke hurriedly continued, "that Miss Graham would marry

you to-morrow. Don't be angry; remember, I was one of your father's oldest friends, and if poor old Percy were alive now, his advice would be, I am certain, the same as mine."

"It is very kind of you," haughtily replied Willie Eskdale, as a burning flush spread over his face—"very kind of you to take such an interest in me. But may I assure you that, though I am certain you mean well, such advice is extremely distasteful to me. Circumstances, of which you are no doubt ignorant, would prevent me, even were I so inclined, from following your advice."

"Circumstances!" disdainfully repeated the Duke, looking his young companion full in the face. "Yes, Eskdale, I know well the *circumstances* to which you refer: a love affair with your brother's head-ranger's daughter, an actress! Lovely, I admit, and good, I believe; for I have tried her with that power which few contemn, the power of gold. Good, I admit again, lovely beyond doubt, but still Viola Chandos the actress, Viola Chandos, for

whom Garry Owen fought a duel in Paris. Your servant's daughter, believe me, could never make a fit wife for you, even if the world should receive her, which it probably would not. A year at the utmost would prove your mistake; and then, Eskdale, would come a life of misery. Your very children would in after life blame you. She herself would be miserable. You could go where you chose, do as you liked; but she—well, from experience I can tell you that her life after the first year or two would be one of long and almost unmixed misery. I am talking to you now," added the Duke rapidly, as he noticed the furious expression of his companion's face, "not as a *roué*, not as a mere club acquaintance, but as one of Percy's oldest friends. I have his letter now—which, alas, I never got until after his death—asking me to be your godfather. I was abroad at the time, and received it only on my return to England. Be angry with me if you like, Eskdale, call me what the world believes me

to be, a *blasé* old fool—I care not what you think or say so long as you will allow what I have just said to sink into your mind. And if it even makes you hesitate I shall not have spoken in vain."

"My dear Duke," quietly answered Willie Eskdale, somewhat astonished at the vehemence of one whom he had always considered a bold gambler, an inveterate *roué*, and an indifferent specimen of his class, but certainly never regarded in the light of a mentor, "my dear Duke, I admit I was angry at first. I thought you were taking an unwarrantable liberty; but from what you have told me, I apologize for thinking so. But indeed you have said nothing but what I am unfortunately only too well aware of. As you know so much, Duke, you may as well know more. Twice have I asked Viola to marry me, and twice, using language almost identical with your own, she has refused me. Viola will not marry me, and, thank Heaven, I am too proud to marry a woman for her

wealth. I know many who have, but I could not. I should feel a slave, and utterly unworthy of the friendship of any honest man or woman. My convictions on this subject are very strong. If I loved a woman with forty thousand a-year, I would unhesitatingly ask her to marry me to-morrow; and if I were in Linden's place I would marry a penniless woman if I loved her. But I could not marry a woman whom I did not love. No, rather a hundred times would I join the French or German army in a country where my name is unknown, and there carve out my own fortunes. I should feel I had done my wife a deadly injury. Night and day the thought would occur to me, I have taken this woman for my wife, to be the mother of my children, and what for?—for gold! When Viola refused me, and declined to see me, I began to drown thought by drinking heavily, but I stopped that. I have always vowed that no habit should conquer me, and I overcame it. It was hard—very hard. Nobody

who has not gone through it can tell how hard. But I conquered, as I always hope to conquer. I am miserable, yet I never parade my misery. Others, I know, suffer much more than I. All this, Duke, I should never have inflicted upon you if you had not in a manner forced it from me. And now let us drop the subject; it is a painful one to me, and must be a disagreeable one to you."

"I will say no more," quietly answered the Duke, looking searchingly into his companion's honest face. "But I cannot believe you to be in the right. One more word I should like to add," he continued hesitatingly, as his brougham turned down St. James's Street, "and you will, I know, take it as I mean it. If ever you should need a friend, remember that, badly as the world speaks of me, you shall always find a sincere one in myself. I have no children, and Percy Eskdale's sons are, and always shall be, my first thought."

CHAPTER XV.

"VIOLET," began Willie Eskdale, entering his sister's own particular snuggery at Estcourt, in which he generally made himself pretty well at home, "I have just had a letter from Claude de Crespigny. He has got leave for six weeks, and writes to remind me of an invitation I gave him when I was last in Paris. He and his father were very polite to me when I was there last year, and I made him promise to come and see us here; he is in the 4th Cuirassiers, you know, and a kind of relation of Marshal M'Mahon. His father," added the young Guardsman, throwing himself lazily into a chair, and amusing himself by turning the contents of his sister's

work-box upside down, "is one of the first cavalry officers in France. Claude wants to come at once, and you know we are all going to the Grahams the day after to-morrow for this race week. Do you think I might ask Mr. Graham to let him come with us?—he could return here afterwards. What do you think?"

"If Mr. Graham has room, I know he would not mind, Willie," said Lady Violet. "Please do not pull all those skeins of silk to pieces," she continued laughingly; "what a mischievous creature you are! Send a telegram and ask Mr. Graham; and if he can put him up, I know he will only be too pleased to do so. I heard from Mabel this morning," she went on brightly, "and she wants to know if you have got that blood-hound puppy which you promised her."

"Yes; he came last night, and is at the keeper's. I will take him down to Thornden Abbey when we go," replied her brother, stretching himself lazily in his chair. "Violet,

I am going to the stables to see Arnold; will you come and look at Twilight?"

"I wish this horrid race was over," answered his sister, rising from her chair. "Whatever possessed you to back her for such a lot of money, Willie? Ronald has done nothing but growl since he heard of it."

"People exaggerate terribly," laughed Eskdale. "I have backed her to win not more than eight thousand at the most. I had a great deal more than that on at one time, but I have laid a lot of it off. As I stand now, if the mare wins I shall clear just a little over £8000; and if she fails, I shall lose a little under £1700. I must get money somehow, Violet, and I certainly could get it nowhere else. But are you coming to see Twilight?" he inquired; "because it is nearly four o'clock, and Arnold does not like her disturbed after five."

"I don't feel up to walking all across the park this evening, Willie," replied Lady Violet, as with a slight shudder she drew

closer to the cheerful blaze, and looked doubtfully at the leaden clouds which, urged by a strong westerly wind, flew by in huge black banks. "Go and see her yourself, and come and tell me all about it afterwards. I'll have tea ready for you here; we don't dine until half-past eight to-night."

"Perhaps that will be better—and you take such a time to dress," answered her brother, going to the door. "Send a telegram in my name to Mr. Graham, and let some one ride over with it at once. I won't be long."

The huge park, with its stately avenues and forest of oaks, stretched almost from the hall doors of Estcourt a distance of two miles towards the south.

And here, nestling amidst giant beeches and gnarled oaks, stood the once famous Estcourt stables. Close by was the training-ground, six furlongs of which had been laid down in tan, while a three mile gallop, with only one slight turn, could be obtained upon

turf which, even in the hottest weather, never grew hard or baked.

Not even Danebury in its palmiest days could boast a better training-ground than Estcourt. And to this was owing the great success of the late Lord Linden's horses. While his teams, in the hot, parched months of July and August, were doing hard work upon an almost velvet sward, his rivals were for the most part pounding away upon the iron-bound gallop at Newmarket, which generally finds out any weak point in a thoroughbred's legs, especially in his final gallops.

Anxious to see his favourite, and have a confidential chat with his old friend Arnold, Willie Eskdale soon covered the two miles of turf which lay between the castle and the stables; and racing down the last glade which led to the trainer's house, burst into that worthy's sanctum breathless and rosy with his exertions.

"I did the distance in fourteen minutes and a half, Arnold!" he exclaimed joyfully,

as the trainer, accustomed to his wild mode of entrance, rose respectfully to receive him. "Not bad, eh? for the grass is dreadfully deep, and I am in no condition. How are you, Mrs. Arnold? I brought the Indian shawl I promised you from London; I will send it down from the Castle. Ah, Isabel! prettier than ever!" he continued, turning laughingly towards his trainer's blushing daughter. "I only got down this morning; but I remembered your book. I hope you will like it."

"Bless me, Mr. Eskdale," began the trainer, looking affectionately at the flushed young face before him, "I have been expecting you all the afternoon; his lordship told me you were coming down. How like your father you do grow!" he continued, in a lower voice. "Come to see the mare, of course? Well, she is right fit, and did a real good gallop this morning. Did you put me on my hundred, Mr. Willie? I saw by the papers some fools had been knocking her

about. King Alfred has been leading her in her work, but I'm blest if she could not beat the old horse. Never was a better constitutioned mare; sound as a bell, and never leaves an oat in her manger."

"I got you seven to one to your hundred," replied young Eskdale; "Johnson laid it. Are you satisfied?"

"A good price, and I am much obliged to you, Mr. Willie," said the trainer, taking a capacious coat from the wall and selecting a key from a bunch in one of the pockets. "Will you see the mare now, sir? and then perhaps you would like some tea; my wife will get it ready."

"Thank you, Arnold, not this evening," replied the other. "I promised Lady Violet to be back in time for tea; Lord Linden has gone to Carlisle, and her ladyship is alone. But let us go and see Twilight. Come too, Isabel, and give us your opinion of what the racing world calls the best huntress of her day."

"Father never lets me go near the mare," answered the child, plaintively. "May I come, father? I should like to see her."

"Of course you can come if Mr. Eskdale wishes it," drily responded the trainer. "Let you see her!" he continued laughingly; "no, not if I know it! The last time you were for giving the mare sugar, a thing I must say I never heard of a steeplechaser being trained on before. But come, sir," he went on, turning towards his young master, "and see the mare at once, for I like her left alone after five o'clock."

Crossing the large court-yard which joined his own comfortable house, and which was completely surrounded by the numerous boxes of his apparently endless stud, Arnold stopped opposite one numbered twenty-eight, and having with his own hands unlocked the heavy padlock which secured an iron bar running across the door, ushered his two companions into a large roomy box.

There, littered in straw to her hocks, and

clothed in the well-known scarlet and white blankets of the Estcourt stables, stood the mare Twilight, of whose excellence the racing-world had of late heard so much.

"Strip her," ordered Willie Eskdale, as upon his entrance two stablemen came hurriedly forward. "Yes, she does look well," he continued slowly, when, on her clothing being instantly swept off, the bonny chestnut mare, her coat glistening under the glare of the gas like a sheet of gold, stood quiet as a sheep before him, her thin blood-like head and taper ears showing her unmistakeable high breeding. "And what a lot of muscle she has put on! She looks hard as iron, and in rare good health. I don't think she could look better, Arnold?"

"No," emphatically returned the trainer, as he critically surveyed the hard bunches of muscle and long low proportions of his charge, "I don't think she could be better; a bit finer perhaps if intended for the flat, but for her journey I think she could not

be fitter. That was the worst of it in the late Earl's time," he continued: "I was never allowed to wind up my horses at home, but off they went to Farland at Newmarket; and Farland, though a good man, is desperately fond of galloping his horses to death. I am glad his lordship lets me keep all his under my own care till wanted at the post. Have you seen enough of her, Mr. Eskdale? If so we will leave her."

"It is a quarter to five now," began Willie Eskdale, as he turned into the court-yard, after seeing the mare sheeted and muzzled, "and I want to get home by five. Say good night for me to your wife. Good night, Isabel; I shall see you to-morrow, Arnold."

"Good night, sir," respectfully returned the trainer. "Your best way is through the chase up the beech avenue; crossing the park in this dull light is bad work."

Anxious to get back to Estcourt punctually, and confident in his knowledge of the way, Willie Eskdale, however, preferred to return

as he had come, and after leaving the stables, struck across one of the paddocks which joined the forest glade. Running at headlong speed down the dark avenue, and never for a moment thinking of encountering any obstacle, he came suddenly in contact with a pedestrian who was carefully groping his way under the dark shadows of the surrounding trees, and who, to judge by his far from pious ejaculations, seemed not best pleased at being thus nearly overthrown.

"Can't you look where you are running to?" the stranger exclaimed angrily, as, despite his apparently herculean frame and great strength, the force of the concussion sent him reeling against a tree. "You might have seriously injured a weaker man than myself."

"If it comes to that," indignantly returned the young Guardsman, recovering from the shock, "perhaps you might inquire whether you have hurt me. How was I to expect to meet any one here? How did you get in? All the gates are locked."

"I suppose you are Lord Linden," said the stranger, as he peered curiously into the other's face, "and in that case I suppose I ought to apologize for trespassing. But, faith, apologies don't come easy to me! So unless you very much require one, I will waive the question. But if you could tell me the way to the south lodge, where Mr. Chandos lives, I should be eternally obliged to you; for absurd though it may seem, I believe I've lost myself in this infernal forest. It's a regular maze of paths."

"My name is Eskdale, not Linden," replied the other, hardly able to contain his laughter at the cool impudence of his questioner, "and if you will come with me I will show you the best way to Chandos's house. It is lucky you met me," he continued, as they turned from the dark forest glade into the open park, "for you were running right upon the stables, and Arnold, if he had imagined you were a tout, would have slipped the blood-hounds. But surely I have seen your face before?" he

continued, musingly, as in the dim light he tried with difficulty to discern his companion's features, "Mr. —— Mr. ——"

"So you are Willie Eskdale, eh?" calmly replied the stranger, drawing his cloak closer round him, and tacitly declining to help the other's memory. "I have often heard of you. Don't trouble yourself to recall my name; it would do you no good supposing you did know it."

"But I do know it now," quietly replied Eskdale, stopping short in his stride. "May I ask what you are doing down here? and why do you want to know Chandos's house? Our head-ranger can surely have no interest for Mr. Hardgrip, agent, and some say chief bully, for Garry Owen?"

"Listen to me, Mr. Eskdale," calmly answered Hardgrip, as he too halted in his walk and turned his face full on his questioner. "Don't try to force a quarrel upon me; few who have done so have come well out of it. I like you from what I have heard and *know*

of you. I am trespassing in your park, and for that I apologize. I lost my way, which must be my excuse. But for the rest, I see no reason why I should tolerate your investigation. As you say, I am agent to Mr. Owen, an Irish gentleman, who is a personal friend of mine; the term 'bully' I don't understand, unless it refers to me in the capacity of Garry Owen's favourite second in more than one of his desperate duels. My errand to your head-ranger has nothing to do with you, therefore may I ask why you inquire into it?"

"I know Garry Owen well by repute as the most desperate *roué* and ruffian of his day," hotly returned Willie Eskdale, "and I have heard of his absurd mania about Viola Chandos—how he took upon himself to fight D'Auprêt in Paris on her account, although she had never seen or spoken to him. It therefore does strike me as strange that Garry Owen's *favourite* agent should be staying at Estcourt with Viola's father. But you can tell Mr. Owen from me, that if he

annoys Miss Chandos by his preposterous attentions, I will call him severely to account."

"Garry Owen would decline to meet you, young man," answered Hardgrip, quietly. "There is no man in England save yourself of whom I could dare say so, and I am not going to tell you the reason. Now if you will kindly point out my way I shall be obliged; it grows late. You see," he continued with a smile, "that I trust you fully, or else I might be afraid that you might set me on a wrong road, and get me mauled by your brother's bloodhounds. And as I trust you, so may you trust me when I assure you that no harm is intended to Miss Chandos."

"Your way lies straight across the park, to those distant clumps of oaks," somewhat sullenly replied Eskdale, pointing to the extremity of the glittering lake. "Leave them on your left, and you will strike the southern drive, which will take you straight to Chandos' house. Tell him from me that

I shall call to-morrow; and unless I get an explanation of this mysterious visit of yours, if I have any interest with Linden, his office of head-ranger will soon be vacant. Good night."

CHAPTER XVI.

THORNDEN ABBEY was an old structure, which certainly dated back to the time of the Wars of the Roses. But little of the old abbey building was left save the court-yard, and an eastern wall of great strength and thickness, completely covered with ivy, and preserved only on account of the picturesque air it gave to the handsome modern building which now replaced the once fine old abbey. Charles I., so the story went, had, on his way to Scotland, before giving himself up to the northern army, stayed a few days at Thornden, and a room is still pointed out as the apartment in which the unfortunate monarch passed some of the last free hours of his existence.

In the reign of Edward IV. Thornden had been the property of the powerful house of Nevile, belonging to no less a personage than the Archbishop, brother to the great Earl of Warwick.

After the battle of Barnet it had gone to the Fulkes, ever the staunch supporters of the House of York. After Bosworth Field, and on the triumph of the Lancastrians, Thornden Abbey again changed hands. It was given by Henry VII. to Reginald Lord Mortimer, whose family held possession until the civil wars of Charles. Then the destinies of Thornden were once more changed, the property going to Sir Francis Seymour, afterwards Lord Randolph, whose family held it until the expulsion of the Stuart dynasty, when the old abbey passed to Lord Descambres, in whose family it remained until 1868.

The eighth Lord Descambres being hard pressed for money, the splendid old abbey, together with some four thousand acres, came into the market, when it was bought at a

somewhat fancy price by Mr. Graham, of the London Stock Exchange.

Situated not twenty miles from Liverpool, Thornden Abbey was indeed a desirable purchase, and although it cost Mr. Graham a very large sum of money, he never regretted making the place his own.

Although much of the present edifice was somewhat new, yet the restorations and additions had been carefully harmonized with the original architecture, so that Thornden Abbey could hold its own with any of the numerous fine seats by which it was surrounded.

The great wealth and taste of Mr. Graham had made the place one of the most luxurious abodes in England. And as his wine was of the oldest, his covers the most extensively preserved, and his guests the best known people of their day, Thornden Abbey was generally looked upon as one of the first houses in the county.

The long corridors and spacious hall were

filled with gems of art: marble statues of priceless value, oil paintings purchased at every great sale in Europe, and china enough to cost the most successful collector a pang of envy as he roamed through the house, gazing at and admiring that which wealth can never obtain without taste—a collection of perfect specimens of every art.

In the great domed hall, the huge windows of which were filled with stained glass of rare design, stood the famous Rosetti organ, which Mr. Graham had bought at Verona and brought to England, to the rage and mortification of Italy's leading musicians, who saw with regret this triumph of art removed from their own country.

It was this, of all the priceless treasures which the Abbey contained, and which one day would be her own, that Mabel Graham loved best. In the dusk of the winter evenings her favourite occupation was to sit for hours at this great instrument, filling the hall and flooding the distant corridors with music

such as, in its ancient days, the old Abbey had never heard.

A born musician, Mabel in this as in every respect resembled her father more than her mother, who gave little heed to anything unconnected with her personal appearance and love of display. The magnificent pictures and delicate carvings collected by her husband she valued only because others envied them; and it is doubtful if she would not have exchanged the most exquisite tapestry or renowned Murillo for some new-fangled daub, the gaudy colouring of which might take her fancy—always provided she was not found out.

Willie Eskdale, wishing to see his favourite Twilight safe in her new quarters at Aintree, over which famous course the long-talked-of Hunters' Race was to be decided in two days, had started by a different train from Estcourt than that by which his brother and sister, together with Sir Seymour Hastings, had travelled. And having seen his mare in the

care of Arnold, he had started for Thornden, arriving after every one else had gone to dress.

Late though it was, however, Mr. Graham, with a courtesy now rarely practised, met Willie on his arrival, and himself took him to his room, entering into a short conversation while his servant began busily unpacking.

"Your friend De Crespigny got here at four o'clock," he observed, as he lit several candles which branched off a massive looking-glass. "He seems a nice young fellow, and I am glad you thought of asking him. He charmed my wife by telling her all the latest Paris fashions —and also scandals," he added, laughingly. "He seems delighted with England, his ideas about our country having been extremely rudimentary. You don't mind this room, do you? It is supposed to be haunted; some people, I know, object to that kind of thing."

"Not I," laughed Eskdale, as his servant pulled off his boots. "If I see any ghost, it will be the shadow of Twilight being beaten

by a head. But who is said to haunt this room?"

"King Charles," replied his host, as he walked towards the door. "He is supposed to have signed some deed here against his will. Absurd, is it not? But anyhow Charles the First would never injure any of *your* family. Your ancestors were always tremendous Cavaliers. But I must leave you now, or I shall be late for dinner. You have half an hour yet to dress, so you need not hurry."

"A black coat, not a scarlet one, Ferguson," said Willie Eskdale, as his host left the room. "This looks something like what one always has been led to believe a haunted chamber would be like," he went on musingly, as he glanced at the huge, heavily-curtained bed and dark oak-panelling of the room. "Do you believe in ghosts, Ferguson?" he inquired laughingly.

"I can't say, sir," answered the servant, as he hurriedly poured the contents of a hot water can into his master's silver shaving

mug. "But I should not like to sleep in a haunted room, that is, knowing it to be so. I have a mortal terror of things which creep about unseen-like."

"I don't suppose unseen spirits could annoy one much," returned his master, glancing at a painting of Prince Rupert, in his well-known scarlet cloak, by Vandyke, which was hung over the crystal mirror. "But I must say this is a very ghostly-looking apartment; all the furniture is black oak, and the curtains are gloomy enough, while the paintings, though perhaps extremely valuable, represent nothing but fierce old cavaliers. Turn that portrait of Sir Thomas Dalzell to the wall, Ferguson; his face has a diabolical expression. The man was certainly more a Russian than a Scotchman."

"He has not the appearance of a Scotchman," returned the valet, giving his opinion with the freedom of an old servant. "It's a dour hard expression he has, and it's but ill he served many of my countrymen."

"Ill though he served them, I would rather

have a dozen of his portraits round me than that one of John Knox," replied Willie Eskdale. "Turn the General round again, Ferguson, and put John Knox's face to the wall instead; I did not notice him at first. The stare of that disgusting traitor and regicide is enough to give one the blues."

"John Knox was never a regicide, and he is no so bad-featured as the General," coolly answered the Highlander, while, obedient to orders, though with visible reluctance, he turned the famous Scottish divine's head to the wall.

"That may be," laughed his master, as he got into his coat, and took a handkerchief from his servant's hand; "but facts are everything; and in my opinion John Knox, in exciting the people of Scotland against their queen, was as much a regicide as Oliver Cromwell. See that there is a good fire kept up in this room," he added turning to the door. "I may not come to bed till two o'clock, but I don't wish to find this great place in total darkness."

"Fire kept up," muttered the faithful valet. "It's funny he should tell me of that, when for the last four years I have never gone to bed without taking off his shoes. And I'll load his pistols and put them handy; if there is anything I *do* hate it's a room as is haunted by an unknown creeping thing."

With which concluding ungrammatical remark Mr. Ferguson beat a hasty retreat from the ghostly chamber, glad to exchange its gloomy silence for the conviviality of the steward's room, there to discuss and take small wagers as to the chances of the champion of Estcourt for the race, now only forty hours off.

* * * * *

"Mr. Eskdale, I have a present for you," said Mabel Graham, when, after sitting some considerable time over their host's undeniable claret, the gentlemen joined the ladies in the large yellow drawing-room opening from the great hall. "And I will give you three guesses," she went on brightly, "to find out what it is. Now try."

"I am to guess, Miss Graham?" laughed the young Guardsman, throwing himself on a low ottoman, and looking up into her pretty face. "You are joking; you know I never could guess anything. Pray tell me, and don't keep me in suspense."

"Come this way and I'll show you; it is in the hall. I could not carry it in after dinner," replied the girl, rising lightly from her chair. "It is a small return for that splendid bloodhound you got for me. When I asked you to get me a puppy, I never intended you to give the fabulous price I hear you did for Cuban," she continued, reproachfully. "How could you? I am told he cost you a small fortune."

"Whoever told you must have small ideas as to what is a fortune then," quietly answered Willie Eskdale, following his young hostess into the hall. "Cuban is a good puppy; few will beat him in his class if you care to show him, and if he pleases you he is worth his price. You would not have liked me to send you a cur?"

"Father saw the dog before you came, and told Lord Linden you had given him to me," replied Miss Graham, bending over a small parcel tied up in scarlet and white silk. "And Lord Linden said that it was the very dog he had been trying to get, but the price had knocked him off. But that of course his younger brother could well afford him. I thought, therefore," added the girl innocently, "that he must have cost a great deal, for I read the other day that your brother had given over two thousand guineas for a yearling."

"You value my present too highly, Miss Mabel," returned her companion. "Cuban only cost seventy guineas, and if Linden had really wanted the dog he would have given anything for him. Two thousand for a yearling!" he went on rapidly, seeming totally forgetful to whom he was speaking; "yes, and he would give ten times that for aught which took his fancy. He doubled his head-ranger's wages the other day because

I told him what I thought of him, and because he refused to answer a question I put to him of great importance to myself. Mr. Chandos now enjoys exactly the same amount from my father's property as I do."

"Don't get so angry, Mr. Eskdale," urged Mabel, soothingly. "Please don't, or I shall never have the courage to show you my small present. I like Lord Linden," she continued, laughingly; "he gave me ten pounds to-day for my school-feast."

"Then I'll give you twenty," responded her companion; "that is to say, if you will take it," he added, more humbly. "But show me your present—what can it be?"

"Only this," answered Miss Graham, cutting the silken strings of the parcel, and pulling out a scarlet and white satin racing jacket and cap. "See, the white belt is worked. I did it myself, and I worked your motto, 'For King and Country,' on the gold collar. Do you like it?"

"It is perfectly beautiful, Miss Mabel,"

replied Willie Eskdale sincerely. "And what a lot of time and trouble it must have cost you! Indeed, I shall value it beyond anything I may ever possess. It is no use to say beyond anything I possess already, as I have nothing in any way equal to it. May Smith wear it the day after to-morrow on Twilight? It will bring me luck, and afterwards none shall ever wear it but myself."

"Of course Captain Smith may wear it; and I am so glad you like it," said Miss Graham. "I do hope you will win; but the course is a terrible one. I rode over it the other day—I mean round it," she laughingly corrected herself. "I don't think Blue Ruin would carry me *over* the Aintree course. And now, Mr. Eskdale, if you have nothing better to do, please play something on the organ. If you have no preference," she went on, hesitatingly, "play me Mozart's 'Twelfth Mass.' It sounds so wonderfully through this old hall. You won't mind my sitting far away from you? I want to hear it perfectly."

"Certainly," replied her companion, sitting down to the famous instrument, and pulling out the requisite stops. "'Twelfth Mass' first, and what afterwards, Miss Mabel?"

"Beethoven's 'Fourteenth Sonata,'" dreamily answered the girl; "it is lovely on the organ. How I wish I had your ear and touch."

"I would give half my fortune to play like you, Eskdale," exclaimed the Duke of Avondale, entering the hall with several others at the end of the 'Fourteenth Sonata.' "Play one thing more before we leave for the smoking-room."

"Yes, play the 'Moonlight Sonata,'" urged Mrs. Graham. "Do—it is my favourite piece."

"Willingly, on the piano, Mrs. Graham," replied Willie, with a smile. "But on the organ I could not. I never heard of it."

"There is a special train at 11.45 to take us to Aintree," broke in Mr. Graham. "Will every one be ready by then? The first day's racing will not be much, but still, as there is

nothing better to do, we may as well see it. And now, who are coming to the smoking-room?"

"Good night, Miss Mabel," said Eskdale, taking up his young hostess's present. "If Twilight wins I shall always attribute it to your kind gift."

"And if she loses," laughed the girl, though a shade of anxiety crossed her face, "what then, Mr. Eskdale? What then?" she repeated, letting her hand rest in his.

"To my own luck," he briefly responded. "Good night. We must hope she will win."

"I have kept a blazing fire up, sir, and put two lamps upon your table," began Ferguson, as he met his master at the head of the staircase at about a quarter to two o'clock. "And I have loaded your pistols, and placed them handy to your bedside," he went on confidentially. "They tell me in the steward's room as there have been some queer doings in this room. Shall I——"

"Do be quiet, Ferguson. Now you have

undressed me you can go. Call me at half-past nine o'clock. Good night. I am too sleepy to stand chattering here all night. Put those matches close to the bed, on that table. Now be off, and mind you call me punctually."

Left alone, Willie Eskdale, after wrapping himself up in his dressing-gown, and dragging a huge arm-chair to the hearth, sat for some time steadfastly gazing into the fire. The famous Vandyke of Charles the First seemed to his gloomy fancy almost to become a living man, and to be about to speak at every moment.

"Confound that picture!" he at last exclaimed, as he jumped from his chair. "What harm have I or mine ever done to the Stuart race that it should scowl so infernally at me? However, I'll go to bed, and then Charles, Dalzell, and Knox may fight it out amongst themselves."

Blowing out the two lamps which stood upon his dressing-table, the young Guardsman, feeling disgusted that a big room and three or

four pictures should have the effect of almost unnerving him, jumped into bed, and watched for some time with idle pleasure the light of the fire throw its flickering ruddy glare on the oaken panels and sombre heavy tapestry.

Dreamily thinking over much that was past, and much which he foresaw must inevitably come, Willie fell into a sort of semi-stupor, in which some time passed, as on recovering full consciousness he saw that the fire had nearly gone out, and the whole room, save for a passing gleam from the dying embers, was in total darkness.

"I hate these big ghostly rooms," he muttered sleepily, as he watched, not without a certain uncomfortable feeling, the shadows which were formed by the expiring fire. "But my pistols are handy. I don't believe in real spirits, and if assumed ones play pranks, why, then they must take the consequences." And turning lazily over, the young Guardsman fell into a profound sleep.

CHAPTER XVII.

A SUNNY though somewhat cold March day dawned for the decision of the famous Hunters' Steeplechase.

Indeed, for so much money had several of the candidates been backed, and such a degree of rivalry existed between the several hunts which sent their representatives, that it is doubtful if even the Liverpool itself attracted more notice from the sporting world.

Yet heavy though the outlays had been upon Ivy Queen, King Arthur, Ettrickdale, and many others, Twilight still held the proud position of favourite. As a matter of fact, the scarlet and white of the Estcourt tables never lacked a host of followers, upon

whatever course they might appear. And besides this, it had been generally rumoured that in Twilight something very superior to hunter's form had been found. How, the knowing ones pretended not to explain; and, inasmuch as the mare was to run untried, it would have been hard to account for their knowledge. But wise looks and an air of mystery go as far upon the turf as in other transactions. And as it was pretty well known that the mare was fit, could stay, and that her party fancied her, the public were not slow to rush in, and with their sovereigns and fivers bring the Estcourt nomination to five to two taken freely.

"I do hope you will win, Mr. Eskdale," exclaimed Miss Graham, as, half an hour previous to the big race, Willie, with his new colours under his arm, prepared to leave the box to see his jockey weigh in. "Good luck, and tell Captain Smith to be sure to land my new colours first."

"It won't be his fault if he does not,"

laughingly replied the other; "no man knows this course better. Good-bye; I shall see you again before the race."

"Twelve stone three, sir? Why, you will need more than a stone and seven pounds of lead. Better get a bigger saddle, sir; excuse me, but Aintree ain't a place to ride in a five pound saddle unless obliged," exclaimed the clerk of the scales, watching Mr. Frederick Netherley, the owner of King Arthur, kick and wriggle about in the weighing-machine, like a baby in convulsions.

"Going to ride that hard puller in a five pound saddle, Fred?" pleasantly exclaimed Willie Eskdale, as, accompanied by the great amateur who was to ride for him, he approached the scales. "Twelve stone three exact; no, we don't want the pound for the bridle; I like to be on the safe side. And now, Smith, come and see Twilight; I think you will say she looks well."

Surrounded and followed by a crowd, only kept at a distance by the frequent threatening

movement of her sheeted quarters, the favourite in the scarlet and white clothing of Estcourt was being paraded up and down the paddock.

The instant Arnold perceived his young master approach, the mare was turned round and stripped, as if by magic, by two helpers who walked on either side. As the chestnut mare, her coat shining like a sheet of gold, with her splendid quarters and shoulders, was exposed to view, a murmur of admiration ran through the assembled crowd, and those who had not backed the favourite now made off to do so, while those who had secured a long price inwardly congratulated themselves upon their cleverness.

"Perfect!" muttered the experienced jockey, as he cast his eye over the magnificent symmetry and grand condition of his mount. "Arnold, you certainly have got her as fit as any one could. Don't pull that surcingle too tight," he continued. "They are not getting up yet. And now, Willie, how do

you want her ridden? She looks wonderfully well. Ivy Queen and King Arthur are the only two I fear, and King Arthur, I should say, will overpower his jockey and run himself to a standstill."

"Ride the race as you like," quietly returned his friend. "No better judge than yourself. But if the race is very slow I should force the running; you see the mare is fit, and I know she can stay. There is Halliday getting up, I suppose you had better do the same. Here, give me your coat. Good luck;—you will have a pleasant ride, at all events!"

"My eye, but he does look well!" muttered a dirty tattered tout, as the Captain gently rode his mount out of the enclosure, his bran-new colours and gold-embroidered collar contrasting well with the mare's bright and glistening coat. A good pair they looked, too—the one the *beau ideal* of a perfect hunter, fit to carry fourteen stone and race over any country; the other a

"gentleman rider" in every sense of the word—such as, unfortunately, is getting somewhat rare now-a-days.

"She looks well; yes, Smith is right there," soliloquized the owner of the favourite, following his mare with a wistful look as she left the enclosure. "And he does not know what a game one she is. If she is collared, which I can hardly believe, she will struggle like a fighting-cock to the end; and if beaten—well, no fault will rest with either her or her rider."

"Tell me their names, I cannot read the colours off quick enough on the card to find out, Mr. Eskdale," said Miss Graham, when Willie entered the box and seated himself by her side to watch the gay parade below.

"The leader is King Arthur, owner up," answered her companion. "Then comes Ivy Queen, Twilight, Ettrickdale, and Flower of Athole. That one in blue is Dark Danube, next comes a mare called Desdemona—a speedy beast I am told, but she looks like

a skeleton. Then there are Harlequin, Patchwork, Hay Fever, and Lady Teazle. The last in yellow is Maid of Perth. See, they are in line. And now—yes, they are off."

As the flag dropped, King Arthur rushed to the front, and soon held quite a dozen lengths lead, which at the first fence he further increased by altogether overpowering his rider, and jumping as if he were racing at Valentine's brook. Next in order came Ivy Queen, Desdemona, and Maid of Perth, whilst heading the hindmost division, her head in her chest, and jumping like a cat under the light skilful hands of her jockey, came the favourite. The clever way in which she fenced, and her long clock-like stride, drew a muttered execration from the ring, and a murmur of admiration from her backers.

Racing away at top speed, yet closely followed by Maid of Perth, King Arthur, infinitely fresher and less blown than his

unfortunate owner, still held the lead, and as they disappeared into the country held so long an advantage as to suggest to the unknowing ones the probability of his never being caught.

"What a fine rider Smith is!" exclaimed the Duke of Avondale, as in charging the first brook, Twilight, over-jumping herself, pecked heavily on landing—nothing but her splendid shoulders and her jockey's fine hands averting a rattling fall. "Any one but a finished horseman would have been down then. There goes Dark Danube," he continued, as that animal rolled headlong into the first ploughed field—"and Harlequin and Hay Fever are on the top of him."

For the first time from the start the owner of King Arthur now was enabled to get a pull at his horse, and Lady Teazle, shooting to the front, took up the running, closely followed by Patchwork and Ivy Queen, King Arthur and Desdemona going on third and fourth. But already the backers of the

favourite were jubilant, and an enthusiastic supporter of the Estcourt stable observed, "The mare could carry any of the rest and then win easy."

"How she does go through dirt!" exclaimed Sir Hawley Vivian, one of the best judges of his day, as with his powerful glasses he watched Twilight galloping through the deep, catching soil. "If Smith chose he could take the lead now, and never be caught. I would risk it too, if I were he. That wild brute King Arthur will come to grief soon, and bring others with him."

From the canal turn home the field now raced close together; and charging the brook opposite the stand, a sheet could almost have covered Lady Teazle, Flower of Athole, Desdemona, the favourite, and King Arthur. Ivy Queen was slightly wide, but not a couple of lengths behind.

"That Lady Teazle goes well," remarked a thick-set, burly trainer, watching the artistic wav in which the Irish mare was handled.

"Bar the favourite, none go better. I'll take ten ponies she wins; who will lay it?"

But finding his liberal offer not kindly responded to, the trainer was fain to remain unaccommodated.

Approaching the first fence from the top of the course, King Arthur, aided now by a reminder from the spurs, rushed to the favourite's girths, and, closely followed by Ivy Queen and Flower of Athole, they raced together for the first time.

"God!" involuntarily ejaculated the Duke of Avondale, as King Arthur, utterly blown by his cutting down tactics, swerved heavily against the favourite, and knocking her completely out of her stride, sent the mare sprawling through the fence. "Twilight is down, and King Arthur is on the top of her! I knew that infernal young duffer would do mischief sooner or later."

Crashing though the fall had been, the experienced jockey of the favourite had never let go his reins; and as Ivy Queen, Lady

Teazle, Flower of Athole, Desdemona, and Ettrickdale swept on, with a muttered imprecation he was up again, and prepared to do all he knew to snatch what he had hitherto considered a certain victory from the fire.

"I'll back Ivy Queen!" exclaimed Sir Hawley Vivian, as with his glasses he saw that mare for the first time shoot to the front, followed by Lady Teazle. "Twilight has lost a good four hundred yards. How much Ivy Queen?"

"They little know what Twilight can do," hoarsely muttered Willie Eskdale, glancing first somewhat savagely towards the now jubilant ring, and then anxiously at his favourite. "It is not five to one she does not win now."

Ridden somewhat hard to recover her lost ground, Twilight for the first time was allowed her head; and deep and heavy as the going was, almost electrified the spectators when, with her long sweeping stride, she rapidly closed upon her field.

"The favourite wins now easy!" shouted a hundred voices, as rounding the bend for home, the bonny chestnut, untouched by whip or spur, raced to within a length of Flower of Athole, and passing Desdemona and Ettrickdale as if they were standing still, came neck and neck with Lady Teazle, some three lengths behind Ivy Queen. To keep his place upon the Irish mare her owner was now, however, hard at work, and with one glance the jockey of the favourite saw that his sole opponent was Ivy Queen.

Riding with the greatest patience and skill, inch by inch he decreased the gap. But Ivy Queen was a better mare than many gave her credit for being. And her heavy fall, and bucketing to make up lost ground, now began to tell upon the favourite. At the last hurdle Ivy Queen held the advantage by half a length, which, with her superior jumping powers, Twilight somewhat reduced —but it was of no use. Splendid mare as she was, the odds had been against her.

And in a ding-dong finish home, the judges' fiat was—"Ivy Queen by a neck, Lady Teazle third, Desdemona fourth."

"If that brute King Arthur had not knocked you over you would have won, Smith, would you not?" quietly asked Willie Eskdale, as he stroked his favourite's foam-flecked neck, and gently rubbed her blood-stained sides. "I am sorry she put you down; you are not hurt, I hope?"

"Hurt, no!" indignantly replied Smith. "I am sorry, Eskdale. If that collision had not occurred your mare would have won easy by—well, if I wished to, by fifty yards."

"Dear old Twilight, you must go up to auction now," muttered the young Guardsman, as he affectionately pulled and stroked her wet frothy ears. "However, Seymour Hastings has promised to buy you, and Violet will look after you, I know."

"The owner of Lady Teazle has made a friendly claim on Twilight, Willie," here interrupted Sir Seymour Hastings as he came

up. "Would you like her to return to Estcourt or to Ainsworth? I'll keep her and look after her for you, but otherwise, remember, the mare is always yours. Violet said I was to tell you so," he went on cheerfully.

"Thank you, Seymour. Then let her go back with Arnold for the present, she has had a good bit taken out of her," returned Eskdale. "You can send for her to Ainsworth when you want her. Thank you for getting Moore to claim her. I should not like to have seen her leave us. She always was a great pet of mine. But come, let us go back to the box. It is no use crying over spilt milk."

END OF VOL. I.